

CHAPTER III - SANDYS ON WOMAN

"Can you kindly tell me the name of the book I want?"

It is the commonest question asked at the circulating library by dainty ladies just out of the carriage; and the librarian, after looking them over, can usually tell. In the days we have now to speak of, however, he answered, without looking them over:

"Sandys's 'Letters,'"

"Ah, yes, of course. May I have it, please?"

"I regret to find that it is out."

Then the lady looked naughty. "Why don't you have two copies?" she pouted.

"Madam," said the librarian, "we have a thousand."

A small and very timid girl of eighteen, with a neat figure that shrank from observation, although it was already aware that it looked best in gray, was there to drink in this music, and carried it home in her heart. She was Elspeth, and that dear heart was almost too full at this time. I hesitate whether to tell or to conceal how it even created a disturbance in no less a place than the House of Commons. She was there with Mrs. Jerry, and the thing was recorded in the papers of the period in these blasting words: "The Home Secretary was understood to be quoting a passage from 'Letters to a Young Man,' but we failed to catch its drift, owing to an unseemly interruption from the ladies' gallery."

"But what was it you cried out?" Tommy asked Elspeth, when she thought she had told him everything. (Like all true women, she always began in the middle.)

"Oh, Tommy, have I not told you? I cried out, 'I'm his sister.'"

Thus, owing to Elspeth's behaviour, it can never be known which was the passage quoted in the House; but we may be sure of one thing--that it did the House good. That book did everybody good. Even Pym could only throw off its beneficent effects by a tremendous effort, and young men about to be married used to ask at the bookshops, not for the "Letters,"

but simply for "Sandys on Woman," acknowledging Tommy as the authority on the subject, like Mill on Jurisprudence, or Thomson and Tait on the Differential Calculus. Controversies raged about it. Some thought he asked too much of man, some thought he saw too much in women; there was a fear that young people, knowing at last how far short they fell of what they ought to be, might shrink from the matrimony that must expose them to each other, now that they had Sandys to guide them, and the persons who had simply married and risked it (and it was astounding what a number of them there proved to be) wrote to the papers suggesting that he might yield a little in the next edition. But Sandys remained firm.

At first they took for granted that he was a very aged gentleman; he had, indeed, hinted at this in the text; and when the truth came out ("And just fancy, he is not even married!") the enthusiasm was doubled. "Not engaged!" they cried. "Don't tell that to me. No unmarried man could have written such a eulogy of marriage without being on the brink of it." Perhaps she was dead? It ran through the town that she was dead. Some knew which cemetery.

The very first lady Mr. Sandys ever took in to dinner mentioned this rumour to him, not with vulgar curiosity, but delicately, with a hint of sympathy in waiting, and it must be remembered, in fairness to Tommy, that all artists love sympathy. This sympathy uncorked him, and our Tommy could flow comparatively freely at last. Observe the delicious change.

"Has that story got abroad?" he said simply. "The matter is one which, I need not say, I have never mentioned to a soul."

"Of course not," the lady said, and waited eagerly.

If Tommy had been an expert he might have turned the conversation to brighter topics, but he was not; there had already been long pauses, and in dinner talk it is perhaps allowable to fling on any faggot rather than let the fire go out. "It is odd that I should be talking of it now," he said musingly.

"I suppose," she said gently, to bring him out of the reverie into which he had sunk, "I suppose it happened some time ago?"

"Long, long ago," he answered. (Having written as an aged person, he often found difficulty in remembering suddenly that he was two and twenty.)

"But you are still a very young man."

"It seems long ago to me," he said with a sigh.

"Was she beautiful?"

"She was beautiful to my eyes."

"And as good, I am sure, as she was beautiful."

"Ah me!" said Tommy.

His confidante was burning to know more, and hoping they were being observed across the table; but she was a kind, sentimental creature, though stout, or because of it, and she said, "I am so afraid that my questions pain you."

"No, no," said Tommy, who was very, very happy.

"Was it very sudden?"

"Fever."

"Ah! but I meant your attachment."

"We met and we loved," he said with gentle dignity.

"That is the true way," said the lady.

"It is the only way," he said decisively.

"Mr. Sandys, you have been so good, I wonder if you would tell me her name?"

"Felicity," he said, with emotion. Presently he looked up. "It is very strange to me," he said wonderingly, "to find myself saying these things to you who an hour ago were a complete stranger to me. But you are not like other women."

"No, indeed!" said the lady, warmly.

"That," he said, "must be why I tell you what I have never told to another human being. How mysterious are the workings of the heart!"

"Mr. Sandys," said the lady, quite carried away, "no words of mine can convey to you the pride with which I hear you say that. Be assured that I shall respect your confidences." She missed his next remark because she was wondering whether she dare ask him to come to dinner on the twenty-fifth, and then the ladies had to retire, and by the time he rejoined her he was as tongue-tied as at the beginning. The cork had not been extracted; it had been knocked into the bottle, where it still often barred the way, and there was always, as we shall see, a flavour of it in the wine.

"You will get over it yet; the summer and the flowers will come to you again," she managed to whisper to him kind-heartedly, as she was going.

"Thank you," he said, with that inscrutable face. It was far from his design to play a part. He had, indeed, had no design at all, but an opportunity for sentiment having presented itself, his mouth had opened as at a cherry. He did not laugh afterwards, even when he reflected how unexpectedly Felicity had come into his life; he thought of her rather with affectionate regard, and pictured her as a tall, slim girl in white. When he took a tall, slim girl in white in to dinner, he could not help saying huskily:

"You remind me of one who was a very dear friend of mine. I was much startled when you came into the room."

"You mean some one who is dead?" she asked in awe-struck tones.

"Fever," he said.

"You think I am like her in appearance?"

"In every way," he said dreamily; "the same sweet--pardon me, but it is very remarkable. Even the tones of the voice are the same. I suppose I ought not to ask your age?"

"I shall be twenty-one in August." "She would have been twenty-one in August had she lived," Tommy said with fervour. "My dear young lady--"

This was the aged gentleman again, but she did not wince; he soon found out that they expect authors to say the oddest things, and this proved to be a great help to him.

"My dear young lady, I feel that I know you very well."

"That," she said, "is only because I resemble your friend outwardly. The real me (she was a bit of philosopher also) you cannot know at all."

He smiled sadly. "Has it ever struck you," he asked, "that you are very unlike other women?"

"Oh, how ever could you have found that out?" she exclaimed, amazed.

Almost before he knew how it came about, he was on terms of very pleasant sentiment with this girl, for they now shared between them a secret that he had confided to no other. His face, which had been so much against him hitherto, was at last in his favour; it showed so plainly that when he looked at her more softly or held her hand longer than is customary, he was really thinking of that other of whom she was the image. Or if it did not precisely show that, it suggested something or other of that nature which did just as well. There was a sweet something between them which brought them together and also kept them apart; it allowed them to go a certain length, while it was also a reason why they could never, never exceed that distance; and this was an ideal state for Tommy, who could be most loyal and tender so long as it was understood that he meant nothing in particular. She was the right kind of girl, too, and admired him the more (and perhaps went a step further) because he remained so true to Felicity's memory.

You must not think him calculating and cold-blooded, for nothing could be less true to the fact. When not engaged, indeed, on his new work, he might waste some time planning scenes with exquisite ladies, in which he sparkled or had a hidden sorrow (he cared not which); but these scenes seldom came to life. He preferred very pretty girls to be rather stupid (oh, the artistic instinct of the man!), but instead of keeping them stupid, as he wanted to do, he found himself trying to improve their minds. They screwed up their noses in the effort. Meaning to thrill the celebrated beauty who had been specially invited to meet him, he devoted himself to a plain woman for whose plainness a sudden pity had mastered him (for, like all true worshippers of beauty in women, he always showed best in the presence of plain ones). With the intention of being a gallant knight to Lady I-Won't-Tell-the-Name, a whim of the moment made him so stiff to her that she ultimately asked the reason; and such a charmingly sad reason presented itself to him that she immediately invited him to her riverside party on Thursday week. He had the conversations and incidents for that party ready long before the day

arrived; he altered them and polished them as other young gentlemen in the same circumstances overhaul their boating costumes; but when he joined the party there was among them the children's governess, and seeing her slighted, his blood boiled, and he was her attendant for the afternoon.

Elspeth was not at this pleasant jink in high life. She had been invited, but her ladyship had once let Tommy kiss her hand for the first and last time, so he decided sternly that this was no place for Elspeth. When temptation was nigh, he first locked Elspeth up, and then walked into it.

With two in every three women he was still as shy as ever, but the third he escorted triumphantly to the conservatory. She did no harm to his work--rather sent him back to it refreshed. It was as if he were shooting the sentiment which other young men get rid of more gradually by beginning earlier, and there were such accumulations of it that I don't know whether he ever made up on them. Punishment sought him in the night, when he dreamed constantly that he was married--to whom scarcely mattered; he saw himself coming out of a church a married man, and the fright woke him up. But with the daylight came again his talent for dodging thoughts that were lying in wait, and he yielded as recklessly as before to every sentimental impulse. As illustration, take his humorous passage with Mrs. Jerry. Geraldine Something was her name, but her friends called her Mrs. Jerry.

She was a wealthy widow, buxom, not a day over thirty when she was merry, which might be at inappropriate moments, as immediately after she had expressed a desire to lead the higher life. "But I have a theory, my dear," she said solemnly to Elspeth, "that no woman is able to do it who cannot see her own nose without the help of a mirror." She had taken a great fancy to Elspeth, and made many engagements with her, and kept some of them, and the understanding was that she apprenticed herself to Tommy through Elspeth, he being too terrible to face by himself, or, as Mrs. Jerry expressed it, "all nose." So Tommy had seen very little of her, and thought less, until one day he called by passionate request to sign her birthday-book, and heard himself proposing to her instead!

For one thing, it was twilight, and she had forgotten to ring for the lamps. That might have been enough, but there was more: she read to him part of a letter in which her hand was solicited in marriage. "And, for

the life of me," said Mrs. Jerry, almost in tears, "I cannot decide whether to say yes or no."

This put Tommy in a most awkward position. There are probably men who could have got out of it without proposing; but to him there seemed at the moment no other way open. The letter complicated matters also by beginning "Dear Jerry," and saying "little Jerry" further on--expressions which stirred him strangely.

"Why do you read this to me?" he asked, in a voice that broke a little.

"Because you are so wise," she said. "Do you mind?"

"Do I mind!" he exclaimed bitterly. ("Take care, you idiot!" he said to himself.)

"I was asking your advice only. Is it too much?"

"Not at all. I am quite the right man to consult at such a moment, am I not?"

It was said with profound meaning; but his face was as usual.

"That is what I thought," she said, in all good faith.

"You do not even understand!" he cried, and he was also looking longingly at his hat.

"Understand what?"

"Jerry," he said, and tried to stop himself, with the result that he added, "dear little Jerry!" ("What am I doing!" he groaned.)

She understood now. "You don't mean--" she began, in amazement.

"Yes," he cried passionately. "I love you. Will you be my wife?" ("I am lost!")

"Gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Jerry; and then, on reflection, she became indignant. "I would not have believed it of you," she said scornfully. "Is it my money, or what? I am not at all clever, so you must tell me."

With Tommy, of course, it was not her money. Except when he had Elspeth to consider, he was as much a Quixote about money as Pym himself; and at no moment of his life was he a snob.

"I am sorry you should think so meanly of me," he said with dignity, lifting his hat; and he would have got away then (which, when you come to think of it, was what he wanted) had he been able to resist an impulse to heave a broken-hearted sigh at the door.

"Don't go yet, Mr. Sandys," she begged. "I may have been hasty. And yet--why, we are merely acquaintances!"

He had meant to be very careful now, but that word sent him off again. "Acquaintances!" he cried. "No, we were never that."

"It almost seemed to me that you avoided me."

"You noticed it!" he said eagerly. "At least, you do me that justice. Oh, how I tried to avoid you!"

"It was because--"

"Alas!"

She was touched, of course, but still puzzled. "We know so little of each other," she said.

"I see," he replied, "that you know me very little, Mrs. Jerry; but you--oh, Jerry, Jerry! I know you as no other man has ever known you!"

"I wish I had proof of it," she said helplessly.

Proof! She should not have asked Tommy for proof. "I know," he cried, "how unlike all other women you are. To the world you are like the rest, but in your heart you know that you are different; you know it, and I know it, and no other person knows it."

Yes, Mrs. Jerry knew it, and had often marvelled over it in the seclusion of her boudoir; but that another should have found it out was strange and almost terrifying.

"I know you love me now," she said softly. "Only love could have shown you that. But--oh, let me go away for a minute to think!" And she ran out of the room.

Other suitors have been left for a space in Tommy's state of doubt, but never, it may be hoped, with the same emotions. Oh, heavens! if she should accept him! He saw Elspeth sickening and dying of the news.

His guardian angel, however, was very good to Tommy at this time; or perhaps, like cannibals with their prisoner, the god of sentiment (who has a tail) was fattening him for a future feast; and Mrs. Jerry's answer was that it could never be.

Tommy bowed his head.

But she hoped he would let her be his very dear friend. It would be the proudest recollection of her life that Mr. Sandys had entertained such feelings for her.

Nothing could have been better, and he should have found difficulty in concealing his delight; but this strange Tommy was really feeling his part again. It was an unforced tear that came to his eye. Quite naturally he looked long and wistfully at her.

"Jerry, Jerry!" he articulated huskily, and whatever the words mean in these circumstances he really meant; then he put his lips to her hand for the first and last time, and so was gone, broken but brave. He was in splendid fettle for writing that evening. Wild animals sleep after gorging, but it sent this monster, refreshed, to his work.

Nevertheless, the incident gave him some uneasy reflections. Was he, indeed, a monster? was one that he could dodge, as yet; but suppose Mrs. Jerry told his dear Elspeth of what had happened? She had said that she would not, but a secret in Mrs. Jerry's breast was like her pug in her arms, always kicking to get free. "Elspeth," said Tommy, "what do you say to going north and having a sight of Thrums again?"

He knew what she would say. They had been talking for years of going back; it was the great day that all her correspondence with old friends in Thrums looked forward to.

"They made little of you, Tommy," she said, "when we left; but I'm thinking they will all be at their windows when you go back."

"Oh," replied Thomas, "that's nothing. But I should like to shake Corp by the hand again."

"And Aaron," said Elspeth. She was knitting stockings for Aaron at that moment.

"And Gavinia," Tommy said, "and the Dominie."

"And Ailie."

And then came an awkward pause, for they were both thinking of that independent girl called Grizel. She was seldom discussed. Tommy was oddly shy about mentioning her name; he would have preferred Elspeth to mention it: and Elspeth had misgivings that this was so, with the result that neither could say "Grizel" without wondering what was in the other's mind. Tommy had written twice to Grizel, the first time unknown to Elspeth, but that was in the days when the ladies of the penny numbers were disturbing him, and, against his better judgment (for well he knew she would never stand it), he had begun his letter with these mad words: "Dear Little Woman." She did not answer this, but soon afterwards she wrote to Elspeth, and he was not mentioned in the letter proper, but it carried a sting in its tail. "P.S.," it said "How is Sentimental Tommy?"

None but a fiend in human shape could have written thus, and Elspeth put her protecting arms round her brother. "Now we know what Grizel is," she said. "I am done with her now."

But when Tommy had got back his wind he said nobly: "I'll call her no names. If this is how she likes to repay me for--for all my kindnesses, let her. But, Elspeth, if I have the chance, I shall go on being good to her just the same."

Elspeth adored him for it, but Grizel would have stamped had she known. He had that comfort.

The second letter he never posted. It was written a few months before he became a celebrity, and had very fine things indeed in it, for old Dr. McQueen, Grizel's dear friend, had just died at his post, and it was a letter of condolence. While Tommy wrote it he was in a quiver of genuine emotion, as he was very pleased to feel, and it had a specially satisfying bit about death, and the world never being the same again. He knew it was good, but he did not send it to her, for no reason I can discover save that postscripts jarred on him.