

CHAPTER XXVIII - TWO OF THEM

When Tommy started impulsively on what proved to be his only Continental trip he had expected to join Mrs. Jerry and her stepdaughter at Bad-Platten. They had been there for a fortnight, and "the place is a dream," Mrs. Jerry had said in the letter pressing him to come; but it was at St. Gian that she met the diligence and told him to descend. Bad-Platten, she explained, was a horror.

Her fuller explanation was that she was becoming known there as the round lady.

"Now, am I as round as all that?" she said plaintively to Tommy.

"Mrs. Jerry," he replied, with emotion, "you must not ask me what I think of you." He always treated her with extraordinary respect and chivalry now, and it awed her.

She had looked too, too round because she was in the company of Lady Pippinworth. Everyone seemed to be too round or too large by the side of that gifted lady, who somehow never looked too thin. She knew her power. When there were women in the room whom she disliked she merely went and stood beside them. In the gyrations of the dance the onlooker would momentarily lose sight of her; she came and went like a blinking candle. Men could not dance with her without its being said that they were getting stout. There is nothing they dislike so much, yet they did dance with her. Tommy, having some slight reason, was particularly sensitive about references to his figure, yet it was Lady Pippinworth who had drawn him to Switzerland. What was her strange attraction?

Calmly considered, she was preposterously thin, but men, at least, could not think merely of her thinness, unless, when walking with her, they became fascinated by its shadow on the ground. She was tall, and had a very clear, pale complexion and light-brown hair. Light brown, too, were her heavy eyelashes, which were famous for being black-tipped, as if a brush had touched them, though it had not. She made play with her eyelashes as with a fan, and sometimes the upper and lower seemed to entangle for a moment and be in difficulties, from which you wanted to extricate them in the tenderest manner. And the more you wanted to

help her the more disdainfully she looked at you. Yet though she looked disdainful she also looked helpless. Now we have the secret of her charm.

This helpless disdain was the natural expression of her face, and I am sure she fell asleep with a curl of the lip. Her scorn of men so maddened them that they could not keep away from her. "Damn!" they said under their breath, and rushed to her. If rumour is to be believed, Sir Harry Pippinworth proposed to her in a fury brought on by the sneer with which she had surveyed his family portraits. I know nothing more of Sir Harry, except that she called him Pips, which seems to settle him.

"They will be calling me the round gentleman," Tommy said ruefully to her that evening, as he strolled with her towards the lake, and indeed he was looking stout. Mrs. Jerry did not accompany them; she wanted to be seen with her trying stepdaughter as little as possible, and Tommy's had been the happy proposal that he should attend them alternately--"fling away my own figure to save yours," he had said gallantly to Mrs. Jerry.

"Do you mind?" Lady Pippinworth asked.

"I mind nothing," he replied, "so long as I am with you."

He had not meant to begin so near the point where they had last left off; he had meant to begin much farther back: but an irresistible desire came over him to make sure that she really did permit him to say this sort of thing.

Her only reply was a flutter of the little fans and a most contemptuous glance.

"Alice," said Tommy, in the old way.

"Well?"

"You don't understand what it is to me to say Alice again."

"Many people call me Alice."

"But they have a right to."

"I supposed you thought you had a right to also."

"No," said Tommy. "That is why I do it."

She strolled on, more scornful and helpless than ever. Apparently it did not matter what one said to Lady Pippinworth; her pout kept it within the proprieties.

There was a magnificent sunset that evening, which dyed a snow-topped mountain pink. "That is what I came all the way from London to see," Tommy remarked, after they had gazed at it.

"I hope you feel repaid," she said, a little tartly.

"You mistake my meaning," he replied. "I had heard of these wonderful sunsets, and an intense desire came over me to see you looking disdainfully at them. Yes, I feel amply repaid. Did you notice, Alice, or was it but a fancy of my own, that when he had seen the expression on your face the sun quite slunk away?"

"I wonder you don't do so also," she retorted. She had no sense of humour, and was rather stupid; so it is no wonder that the men ran after her.

"I am more gallant than the sun," said he. "If I had been up there in its place, Alice, and you had been looking at me, I could never have set."

She pouted contemptuously, which meant, I think, that she was well pleased. Yet, though he seemed to be complimenting her, she was not sure of him. She had never been sure of Tommy, nor, indeed, he of her, which was probably why they were so interested in each other still.

"Do you know," Tommy said, "what I have told you is really at least half the truth? If I did not come here to see you disdain the sun, I think I did come to see you disdain me. Odd, is it not, if true, that a man should travel so far to see a lip curl up?"

"You don't seem to know what brought you," she said.

"It seems so monstrous," he replied, musing. "Oh, yes, I am quite certain that the curl of the lip is responsible for my being here; it kept sending me constant telegrams; but what I want to know is, do I come for the pleasure of the thing or for the pain? Do I like your disdain, Alice, or does it make me writhe? Am I here to beg you to do it again, or to defy it?"

"Which are you doing now?" she inquired.

"I had hoped," he said with a sigh, "that you could tell me that."

On another occasion they reached the same point in this discussion, and went a little beyond it. It was on a wet afternoon, too, when Tommy had vowed to himself to mend his ways. "That disdainful look is you," he told her, "and I admire it more than anything in nature; and yet, Alice, and yet----"

"Well?" she answered coldly, but not moving, though he had come suddenly too near her. They were on a private veranda of the hotel, and she was lolling in a wicker chair.

"And yet," he said intensely, "I am not certain that I would not give the world to have the power to drive that look from your face. That, I begin to think, is what brought me here."

"But you are not sure," she said, with a shrug of the shoulder.

It stung him into venturing further than he had ever gone with her before. Not too gently, he took her head in both his hands and forced her to look up at him. She submitted without a protest. She was disdainful, but helpless.

"Well?" she said again.

He withdrew his hands, and she smiled mockingly.

"If I thought----" he cried with sudden passion, and stopped.

"You think a great deal, don't you?" she said. She was going now.

"If I thought there was any blood in your veins, you icy woman----"

"Or in your own," said she. But she said it a little fiercely, and he noticed that.

"Alice," he cried, "I know now. It is to drive that look from your face that I am here."

She courtesied from the door. She was quite herself again.

But for that moment she had been moved. He was convinced of it, and his first feeling was of exultation as in an achievement. I don't know what you are doing just now, Lady Pippinworth, but my compliments to you, and T. Sandys is swelling.

There followed on this exultation another feeling as sincere--devout thankfulness that he had gone no further. He drew deep breaths of relief over his escape, but knew that he had not himself to thank. His friends, the little sprites, had done it, in return for the amusement he seemed to give them. They had stayed him in the nick of time, but not earlier; it was quite as if they wanted Tommy to have his fun first. So often they had saved him from being spitted, how could he guess that the great catastrophe was fixed for to-night, and that henceforth they were to sit round him counting his wriggles, as if this new treatment of him tickled them even more than the other?

But he was too clever not to know that they might be fattening him for some very special feast, and his thanks took the form of a vow to need their help no more. To-morrow he would begin to climb the mountains around St. Gian; if he danced attendance on her dangerous Ladyship again, Mrs. Jerry should be there also, and he would walk circumspectly between them, like a man with gyves upon his wrists. He was in the midst of all the details of these reforms, when suddenly he looked at himself thus occupied, and laughed bitterly; he had so often come upon Tommy making grand resolves!

He stopped operations and sat down beside them. No one could have wished more heartily to be anybody else, or have had less hope. He had not even the excuse of being passionately drawn to this woman; he remembered that she had never interested him until he heard of her effect upon other men. Her reputation as a duellist, whose defence none of his sex could pass, had led to his wondering what they saw in her, and he had dressed himself in their sentiments and so approached her. There were times in her company when he forgot that he was wearing borrowed garments, when he went on flame, but he always knew, as now, upon reflection. Nothing seemed easier at this moment than to fling them aside; with one jerk they were on the floor. Obviously it was only vanity that had inspired him, and vanity was satisfied: the easier, therefore, to stop. Would you like to make the woman unhappy, Tommy? You know you would not; you have somewhere about you one of the softest hearts in the world. Then desist; be satisfied that you did thaw her once, and grateful that she so quickly froze again. "I am; indeed I am," he responds. "No one could have himself better in hand for the time being than I, and if a competition in morals were now going on, I should certainly take the medal. But I cannot speak for myself an hour in advance. I make a vow,

as I have done so often before, but it does not help me to know what I may be at before the night is out."

When his disgust with himself was at its height he suddenly felt like a little god. His new book had come into view. He flicked a finger at his reflection in a mirror. "That for you!" he said defiantly; "at least I can write; I can write at last!"

The manuscript lay almost finished at the bottom of his trunk. It could not easily have been stolen for one hour without his knowing. Just when he was about to start on a walk with one of the ladies, he would run upstairs to make sure that it was still there; he made sure by feeling, and would turn again at the door to make sure by looking. Miser never listened to the crispness of bank-notes with more avidity; woman never spent more time in shutting and opening her jewel-box.

"I can write at last!" He knew that, comparatively speaking, he had never been able to write before. He remembered the fuss that had been made about his former books. "Pooh!" he said, addressing them contemptuously.

Once more he drew his beloved manuscript from its hiding-place. He did not mean to read, only to fondle; but his eye chancing to fall on a special passage--two hours afterwards he was interrupted by the dinner-gong. He returned the pages to the box and wiped his eyes. While dressing hurriedly he remembered with languid interest that Lady Pippinworth was staying in the same hotel.

There were a hundred or more at dinner, and they were all saying the same thing: "Where have you been to-day?" "Really! but the lower path is shadier." "Is this your first visit?" "The glacier is very nice." "Were you caught in the rain?" "The view from the top is very nice." "After all, the rain lays the dust." "They give you two sweets at Bad-Platten and an ice on Sunday." "The sunset is very nice." "The poulet is very nice." The hotel is open during the summer months only, but probably the chairs in the dining-room and the knives and forks in their basket make these remarks to each other every evening throughout the winter.

Being a newcomer, Tommy had not been placed beside either of his friends, who sat apart "because," Mrs. Jerry said, "she calls me mamma, and I am not going to stand that." For some time he gave thought to neither of them; he was engrossed in what he had been reading, and it

turned him into a fine and magnanimous character. When gradually her Ladyship began to flit among his reflections, it was not to disturb them, but because she harmonized. He wanted to apologize to her. The apology grew in grace as the dinner progressed; it was so charmingly composed that he was profoundly stirred by it.

The opportunity came presently in the hall, where it is customary after dinner to lounge or stroll if you are afraid of the night air. Or if you do not care for music, you can go into the drawing-room and listen to the piano.

"I am sure mamma is looking for you everywhere," Lady Pippinworth said, when Tommy took a chair beside her. "It is her evening, you know."

"Surely you would not drive me away," he replied with a languishing air, and then smiled at himself, for he was done with this sort of thing. "Lady Pippinworth," said he, firmly--it needs firmness when of late you have been saying "Alice."

"Well?"

"I have been thinking----" Tommy began.

"I am sure you have," she said.

"I have been thinking," he went on determinedly, "that I played a poor part this afternoon. I had no right to say what I said to you."

"As far as I can remember," she answered, "you did not say very much."

"It is like your generosity, Lady Pippinworth," he said, "to make light of it; but let us be frank: I made love to you."

Anyone looking at his expressionless face and her lazy disdain (and there were many in the hall) would have guessed that their talk was of where were you to-day? and what should I do to-morrow?

"You don't really mean that?" her Ladyship said incredulously. "Think, Mr. Sandys, before you tell me anything more. Are you sure you are not confusing me with mamma?"

"I did it," said Tommy, remorsefully.

"In my absence?" she asked.

"When you were with me on the veranda."

Her eyes opened to their widest, so surprised that the lashes had no time for their usual play.

"Was that what you call making love, Mr. Sandys?" she inquired.

"I call a spade a spade."

"And now you are apologizing to me, I understand?"

"If you can in the goodness of your heart forgive me, Lady Pippinworth--"

"Oh, I do," she said heartily, "I do. But how stupid you must have thought me not even to know! I feel that it is I who ought to apologize. What a number of ways there seem to be of making love, and yours is such an odd way!"

Now to apologize for playing a poor part is one thing, and to put up with the charge of playing a part poorly is quite another. Nevertheless, he kept his temper.

"You have discovered an excellent way of punishing me," he said manfully, "and I submit. Indeed, I admire you the more. So I am paying you a compliment when I whisper that I know you knew."

But she would not have it. "You are so strangely dense to-night," she said. "Surely, if I had known, I would have stopped you. You forget that I am a married woman," she added, remembering Pips rather late in the day.

"There might be other reasons why you did not stop me," he replied impulsively.

"Such as?"

"Well, you--you might have wanted me to go on."

He blurted it out.

"So," said she slowly, "you are apologizing to me for not going on?"

"I implore you, Lady Pippinworth," Tommy said, in much distress, "not to think me capable of that. If I moved you for a moment, I am far from

boasting of it; it makes me only the more anxious to do what is best for you."

This was not the way it had shaped during dinner, and Tommy would have acted wisely had he now gone out to cool his head. "If you moved me?" she repeated interrogatively; but, with the best intentions, he continued to flounder.

"Believe me," he implored her, "had I known it could be done, I should have checked myself. But they always insist that you are an iceberg, and am I so much to blame if that look of hauteur deceived me with the rest? Oh, dear Lady Disdain," he said warmly, in answer to one of her most freezing glances, "it deceives me no longer. From that moment I knew you had a heart, and I was shamed--as noble a heart as ever beat in woman," he added. He always tended to add generous bits when he found it coming out well.

"Does the man think I am in love with him?" was Lady Disdain's inadequate reply.

"No, no, indeed!" he assured her earnestly. "I am not so vain as to think that, nor so selfish as to wish it; but if for a moment you were moved----"

"But I was not," said she, stamping her shoe.

His dander began to rise, as they say in the north; but he kept grip of politeness.

"If you were moved for a moment, Lady Pippinworth," he went on, in a slightly more determined voice,--"I am far from saying that it was so; but if----"

"But as I was not----" she said.

It was no use putting things prettily to her when she snapped you up in this way.

"You know you were," he said reproachfully.

"I assure you," said she, "I don't know what you are talking about, but apparently it is something dreadful; so perhaps one of us ought to go away."

As he did not take this hint, she opened a tattered Tauchnitz which was lying at her elbow. They are always lying at your elbow in a Swiss hotel, with the first pages missing.

Tommy watched her gloomily. "This is unworthy of you," he said.

"What is?"

He was not quite sure, but as he sat there misgivings entered his mind and began to gnaw. Was it all a mistake of his? Undeniably he did think too much. After all, had she not been moved? 'Sdeath!

His restlessness made her look up. "It must be a great load off your mind," she said, with gentle laughter, "to know that your apology was unnecessary."

"It is," Tommy said; "it is." ('Sdeath!)

She resumed her book.

So this was how one was rewarded for a generous impulse! He felt very bitter. "So, so," he said inwardly; also, "Very well, ve-ry well." Then he turned upon himself. "Serve you right," he said brutally. "Better stick to your books, Thomas, for you know nothing about women." To think for one moment that he had moved her! That streak of marble moved! He fell to watching her again, as if she were some troublesome sentence that needed licking into shape. As she bent impertinently over her book, she was an insult to man. All Tommy's interest in her revived. She infuriated him.

"Alice," he whispered.

"Do keep quiet till I finish this chapter," she begged lazily.

It brought him at once to the boiling-point.

"Alice!" he said fervently.

She had noticed the change in his voice. "People are looking," she said, without moving a muscle.

There was some subtle flattery to him in the warning, but he could not ask for more, for just then Mrs. Jerry came in. She was cloaked for the garden, and he had to go with her, sulkily. At the door she observed that the ground was still wet.

"Are you wearing your goloshes?" said he, brightening. "You must get them, Mrs. Jerry; I insist."

She hesitated. (Her room was on the third floor.) "It is very good of you to be so thoughtful of me," she said, "but----"

"But I have no right to try to take care of you," he interposed in a melancholy voice. "It is true. Let us go."

"I sha'n't be two minutes," said Mrs. Jerry, in a flutter, and went off hastily for her goloshes, while he looked fondly after her. At the turn of the stair she glanced back, and his eyes were still begging her to hurry. It was a gracious memory to her in the after years, for she never saw him again.

As soon as she was gone he returned to the hall, and taking from a peg a cloak with a Mother Goose hood, brought it to Lady Pippinworth, who had watched her mamma trip upstairs.

"Did I say I was going out?" she asked.

"Yes," said Tommy, and she rose to let him put the elegant thing round her. She was one of those dangerous women who look their best when you are helping them to put on their cloaks.

"Now," he instructed her, "pull the hood over your head."

"Is it so cold as that?" she said, obeying.

"I want you to wear it," he answered. What he meant was that she never looked quite so impudent as in her hood, and his vanity insisted that she should be armed to the teeth before they resumed hostilities. The red light was in his eyes as he drew her into the garden where Grizel lay.