CHAPTER XXIII

The man who in all England was most deeply submerged in deadly boredom was, the old Duke of Stone said with wearied finality, himself. He had been a sinful young man of finished taste in 1820; he had cultivated these tastes, which were for literature and art and divers other things, in the most richly alluring foreign capitals until finding himself becoming an equally sinful and finished elderly man, he had decided to marry. After the birth of her four daughters, his wife had died and left them on his hands. Developing at that time a tendency to rheumatic gout and a daily increasing realization of the fact that the resources of a poor dukedom may be hopelessly depleted by an expensive youth passed brilliantly in Vienna, Paris, Berlin, and London, when it was endurable, he found it expedient to give up what he considered the necessities of life and to face existence in the country in England.
It is not imperative that one should enter into detail. There was much, and it covered years during which his four daughters grew up and he "grew down," as he called it. If his temper had originally been a bad one, it would doubtless have become unbearable; as he had been born an amiable person, he merely sank into the boredom which threatens extinction. His girls bored him, his neighbors bored him, Stone Hover bored him, Lancashire bored him, England had always bored him except at abnormal moments.

"I read a great deal, I walk when I can," this he wrote once to a

friend in Rome. "When I am too stiff with rheumatic gout, I drive myself about in a pony chaise and feel like an aunt in a Bath chair. I have so far escaped the actual chair itself. It perpetually rains here, I may mention, so I don't get out often. You who gallop on white roads in the sunshine and hear Italian voices and vowels, figure to yourself your friend trundling through damp, lead-colored Lancashire lanes and being addressed in the Lancashire dialect. But so am I driven by necessity that I listen to it gratefully. I want to hear village news from villagers. I have become a gossip. It is a wonderful thing to be a gossip. It assists one to get through one's declining years. Do not wait so long as I did before becoming one. Begin in your roseate middle age."

An attack of gout more severe than usual had confined him to his room for some time after the arrival of the new owner of Temple Barholm. He had, in fact, been so far indisposed that a week or two had passed before he had heard of him. His favorite nurse had been chosen by him, because she was a comfortable village woman whom he had taught to lay aside her proper awe and talk to him about her own affairs and her neighbors when he was in the mood to listen. She spoke the broadest possible dialect,--he liked dialect, having learned much in his youth from mellow-eyed Neapolitan and Tuscan girls,--and she had never been near a hospital, but had been trained by the bedsides of her children and neighbors.

"If I were a writing person, she would become literature, impinging

upon Miss Mitford's tales of 'Our Village,' Miss Austen's varieties, and the young Bronte woman's 'Wuthering Heights.' Mon Dieu! what a resource it would be to be a writing person!" he wrote to the Roman friend.

To his daughters he said:

"She brings back my tenderest youth. When she pokes the fire in the twilight and lumbers about the room, making me comfortable, I lie in my bed and watch the flames dancing on the ceiling and feel as if I were six and had the measles. She tucks me in, my dears--she tucks me in, I assure you. Sometimes I feel it quite possible that she will bend over and kiss me."

She had tucked him in luxuriously in his arm-chair by the fire on the first day of his convalescence, and as she gave him his tray, with his beef tea and toast, he saw that she contained anecdotal information of interest which tactful encouragement would cause to flow.

"Now that I am well enough to be entertained, Braddle," he said, "tell me what has been happening."

"A graidely lot, yore Grace," she answered; "but not so much i' Stone Hover as i' Temple Barholm. He's coom!"

Then the duke vaguely recalled rumors he had heard sometime before his

indisposition.

"The new Mr. Temple Barholm? He's an American, isn't he? The lost heir who had to be sought for high and low-- principally low, I understand."

The beef tea was excellently savory, the fire was warm, and relief from two weeks of pain left a sort of Nirvana of peace. Rarely had the duke passed a more delightfully entertaining morning. There was a richness in the Temple Barholm situation, as described in detail by Mrs. Braddle, which filled him with delight. His regret that he was not a writing person intensified itself. Americans had not appeared upon the horizon in Miss Mitford's time, or in Miss Austen's, or in the Brontes' the type not having entirely detached itself from that of the red Indian. It struck him, however, that Miss Austen might have done the best work with this affair if she had survived beyond her period. Her finely demure and sly sense of humor would have seen and seized upon its opportunities. Stark moorland life had not encouraged humor in the Brontes, and village patronage had not roused in Miss Mitford a sense of ironic contrasts. Yes, Jane Austen would have done it best.

That the story should be related by Mrs. Braddle gave it extraordinary flavor. No man or woman of his own class could have given such a recounting, or revealed so many facets of this jewel of entertainment. He and those like him could have seen the thing only from their own

amused, outraged, bewildered, or cynically disgusted point of view. Mrs. Braddle saw it as the villagers saw it--excited, curious, secretly hopeful of undue lavishness from "a chap as had nivver had brass before an' wants to chuck it away for brag's sake," or somewhat alarmed at the possible neglecting of customs and privileges by a person ignorant of memorial benefactions. She saw it as the servants saw it--secretly disdainful, outwardly respectful, waiting to discover whether the sacrifice of professional distinction would be balanced by liberties permitted and lavishness of remuneration and largess. She saw it also from her own point of view--that of a respectable cottage dweller whose great-great-grandfather had been born in a black-and-white timbered house in a green lane, and who knew what were "gentry ways" and what nature of being could never even remotely approach the assumption of them. She had seen Tembarom more than once, and summed him up by no means ill-naturedly.

"He's not such a bad-lookin' chap. He is na short-legged or turn-up-nosed, an' that's summat. He con stride along, an' he looks healthy enow for aw he's thin. A thin chap nivver looks as common as a fat un. If he wur pudgy, it ud be a lot more agen him."

"I think, perhaps," amiably remarked the duke, sipping his beef tea, "that you had better not call him a `chap,' Braddle. The late Mr. Temple Barholm was never referred to as a `chap' exactly, was he?"

Mrs. Braddle gave vent to a sort of internal-sounding chuckle. She had

not meant to be impertinent, and she knew her charge was aware that she had not, and that he was neither being lofty or severe with her.

"Eh, I'd 'a'loiked to ha' heard somebody do it when he was nigh," she said. "Happen I'd better be moindin' ma P's an' Q's a bit more. But that's what this un is, yore Grace. He's a `chap' out an' out. An' theer's some as is sayin' he's not a bad sort of a chap either. There's lots o' funny stories about him i' Temple Barholm village. He goes in to th' cottages now an' then, an' though a fool could see he does na know his place, nor other people's, he's downreet open-handed. An' he maks foak laugh. He took a lot o' New York papers wi' big pictures in 'em to little Tummas Hibblethwaite. An' wot does tha think he did one rainy day? He walks in to the owd Dibdens' cottage, an' sits down betwixt 'em as they sit one each side o' th' f're, an' he tells 'em they've got to cheer him up a bit becos he's got nought to do. An' he shows 'em th' picter-papers, too, an' tells 'em about New York, an' he ends up wi' singin' 'em a comic song. They was frightened out o' their wits at first, but somehow he got over 'em, an' made 'em laugh their owd heads nigh off."

Her charge laid his spoon down, and his shrewd, lined face assumed a new expression of interest.

"Did he! Did he, indeed!" he exclaimed. "Good Lord! what an exhilarating person! I must go and see him. Perhaps he'd make me laugh my `owd head nigh off.' What a sensation! "

There was really immense color in the anecdotes and in the side views accompanying them; the routing out of her obscurity of the isolated, dependent spinster relative, for instance. Delicious! The man was either desperate with loneliness or he was one of the rough-diamond benefactors favored by novelists, in which latter case he would not be so entertaining. Pure self-interest caused the Duke of Stone quite unreservedly to hope that he was anguished by the unaccustomedness of his surroundings, and was ready to pour himself forth to any one who would listen. There would be originality in such a situation, and one could draw forth revelations worth forming an audience to. He himself had thought that the volte-face such circumstances demanded would surely leave a man staring at things foreign enough to bore him. This, indeed, had been one of his cherished theories; but the only man he had ever encountered who had become a sort of millionaire between one day and another had been an appalling Yorkshire man, who had had some extraordinary luck with diamond-mines in South Africa, and he had been simply drunk with exhilaration and the delight of spending money with both hands, while he figuratively slapped on the back persons who six weeks before would have kicked him for doing it.

This man did not appear to be excited. The duke mentally rocked with gleeful appreciation of certain things Mrs. Braddle detailed. She gave, of course, Burrill's version of the brief interview outside the dining-room door when Miss Alicia's status in the household bad been made clear to him. But the duke, being a man endowed with a subtle

sense of shades, was wholly enlightened as to the inner meaning of Burrill's master.

"Now, that was good," he said to himself, almost chuckling. "By the Lord! the man might have been a gentleman."

When to all this was added the story of the friend or poor relative, or what not, who was supposed to be "not quoite reet i' th' yed," and was taken care of like a prince, in complete isolation, attended by a valet, visited and cheered up by his benefactor, he felt that a boon had indeed been bestowed upon him. It was a nineteenth century "Mysteries of Udolpho" in embryo, though too greatly diluted by the fact that though the stranger was seen by no one, the new Temple Barholm made no secret of him.

If he had only made a secret of him, the whole thing would have been complete. There was of course in the situation a discouraging suggestion that Temple Barholm MIGHT turn out to be merely the ordinary noble character bestowing boons.

"I will burn a little candle to the Virgin and offer up prayers that he may NOT. That sort of thing would have no cachet whatever, and would only depress me," thought his still sufficiently sinful Grace.

"When, Braddle, do you think I shall be able to take a drive again?" he asked his nurse.

Braddle was not prepared to say upon her own responsibility, but the doctor would tell him when he came in that afternoon.

"I feel astonishingly well, considering the sharpness of the attack," her patient said. "Our little talk has quite stimulated me. When I go out,"--there was a gleam in the eye he raised to hers,--" I am going to call at Temple Barholm."

"I knowed tha would," she commented with maternal familiarity. "I dunnot believe tha could keep away."

And through the rest of the morning, as he sat and gazed into the fire, she observed that he several times chuckled gently and rubbed his delicate, chill, swollen knuckled hands together.

A few weeks later there were some warm days, and his Grace chose to go out in his pony carriage. Much as he detested the suggestion of "the aunt in the Bath chair," he had decided that he found the low, informal vehicle more entertaining than a more imposing one, and the desperation of his desire to be entertained can be comprehended only by those who have known its parallel. If he was not in some way amused, he found himself whirling, with rheumatic gout and seventy years, among recollections of vivid pictures better hung in galleries with closed doors. It was always possible to stop the pony carriage to look at views--bits of landscape caught at by vision through trees or

under their spreading branches, or at the end of little green-hedged lanes apparently adorned with cottages, or farm-houses with ricks and barn-yards and pig-pens designed for the benefit of Morland and other painters of rusticity. He could also slacken the pony's pace and draw up by roadsides where solitary men sat by piles of stone, which they broke at leisure with hammers as though they were cracking nuts. He had spent many an agreeable half-hour in talk with a road-mender who could be led into conversation and was left elated by an extra shilling. As in years long past he had sat under chestnut-trees in the Apennines and shared the black bread and sour wine of a peasant, so in these days he frequently would have been glad to sit under a hedge and eat bread and cheese with a good fellow who did not know him and whose summing up of the domestic habits and needs of "th' workin' mon" or the amiabilities or degeneracies of the gentry would be expressed, figuratively speaking, in thoughts and words of one syllable. The pony, however, could not take him very far afield, and one could not lunch on the grass with a stone-breaker well within reach of one's own castle without an air of eccentricity which he no more chose to assume than he would have chosen to wear long hair and a flowing necktie. Also, rheumatic gout had not hovered about the days in the Apennines. He did not, it might be remarked, desire to enter into conversation with his humble fellow-man from altruistic motives. He did it because there was always a chance more or less that he would be amused. He might hear of little tragedies or comedies,-- he much preferred the comedies,--and he often learned new words or phrases of dialect interestingly allied to pure Anglo-Saxon. When this last occurred, he

entered them in a notebook he kept in his library. He sometimes pretended to himself that he was going to write a book on dialects; but he knew that he was a dilettante sort of creature and would really never do it. The pretense, however, was a sort of asset. In dire moments during rains or foggy weather when he felt twinges and had read till his head ached, he had wished that he had not eaten all his cake at the first course of life's feast, that he had formed a habit or so which might have survived and helped him to eke out even an easy-chair existence through the last courses. He did not find consolation in the use of the palliative adjective as applied to himself. A neatly cynical sense of humor prevented it. He knew he had always been an entirely selfish man and that he was entirely selfish still, and was not revoltingly fretful and domineering only because he was constitutionally unirritable.

He was, however, amiably obstinate, and was accustomed to getting his own way in most things. On this day of his outing he insisted on driving himself in the face of arguments to the contrary. He was so fixed in his intention that his daughters and Mrs. Braddle were obliged to admit themselves overpowered.

"Nonsense! Nonsense!" he protested when they besought him to allow himself to be driven by a groom. "The pony is a fat thing only suited to a Bath chair. He does not need driving. He doesn't go when he is driven. He frequently lies down and puts his cheek on his hand and goes to sleep, and I am obliged to wait until he wakes up."

"But, papa, dear," Lady Edith said, "your poor hands are not very strong. And he might run away and kill you. Please do be reasonable!"

"My dear girl," he answered, "if he runs, I shall run after him and kill him when I catch him. George," he called to the groom holding the plump pony's head, "tell her ladyship what this little beast's name is."

"The Indolent Apprentice, your Grace," the groom answered, touching his hat and suppressing a grin.

"I called him that a month ago," said the duke. "Hogarth would have depicted all sorts of evil ends for him. Three weeks since, when I was in bed being fed by Braddle with a spoon, I could have outrun him myself. Let George follow me on a horse if you like, but he must keep out of my sight. Half a mile behind will do."

He got into the phaeton, concealing his twinges with determination, and drove down the avenue with a fine air, sitting erect and smiling. Indoor existence had become unendurable, and the spring was filling the woods.

"I love the spring," he murmured to himself. "I am sentimental about it. I love sentimentality, in myself, when I am quite alone. If I had been a writing person, I should have made verses every year in April

and sent them to magazines-- and they would have been returned to me."

The Indolent Apprentice was, it is true, fat, though comely, and he was also entirely deserving of his name. Like his Grace of Stone, however, he had seen other and livelier days, and now and then he was beset by recollections. He was still a rather high, though slow, stepper--the latter from fixed preference. He had once stepped fast, as well as with a spirited gait. During his master's indisposition he had stood in his loose box and professed such harmlessness that he had not been annoyed by being taken out for exercise as regularly as he might have been. He had champed his oats and listened to the repartee of the stable-boys, and he had, perhaps, felt the coming of the spring when the cuckoo insisted upon it with thrilling mellowness across the green sweeps of the park land. Sometimes it made him sentimental, as it made his master, sometimes it made him stamp his small hoofs restlessly in his straw and want to go out. He did not intend, when he was taken out, to emulate the Industrious Apprentice by hastening his pace unduly and raising false hopes for the future, but he sniffed in the air the moist green of leafage and damp moss, massed with yellow primroses cuddling in it as though for warmth, and he thought of other fresh scents and the feel of the road under a pony's feet.

Therefore, when he found himself out in the world again, he shook his head now and then and even tossed it with the recurring sensations of a pony who was a mere boy and still slight in the waist.

"You feel it too, do you? " said the duke. "I won't remind you of your years."

The drive from Stone Hover to the village of Temple Barholm was an easy one, of many charms of leaf-arched lanes and green- edged road. The duke had always had a partiality for it, and he took it this morning. He would probably have taken it in any case, but Mrs. Braddle's anecdotes had been floating through his mind when he set forth and perhaps inclined him in its direction.

The groom was a young man of three and twenty, and he felt the spring also. The horse he rode was a handsome animal, and he himself was not devoid of a healthy young man's good looks. He knew his belted livery was becoming to him, and when on horseback he prided himself on what he considered an almost military bearing. Sarah Hibson, farmer Hibson's dimple-chinned and saucy-eyed daughter, had been "carryin' on a good bit" with a soldier who was a smart, well-set-up, impudent fellow, and it was the manifest duty of any other young fellow who had considered himself to be "walking out with her" to look after his charges. His Grace had been most particular about George's keeping far enough behind him; and as half a mile had been mentioned as near enough, certainly one was absolved from the necessity of keeping in sight. Why should not one turn into the lane which ended at Hibson's farm-yard, and drop into the dairy, and "have it out wi' Sarah?"

Dimpled chins and saucy eyes, and bare, dimpled arms and hands patting

butter while heads are tossed in coquettishly alluring defiance, made even "having it out" an attractive and memory-obscuring process. Sarah was a plump and sparkling imp of prettiness, and knew the power of every sly glance and every dimple and every golden freckle she possessed. George did not know it so well, and in ten minutes had lost his head and entirely forgotten even the half-mile behind.

He was lover-like, he was masterful, he brought the spring with him; he "carried on," as Sarah put it, until he had actually out-distanced the soldier, and had her in his arms, kissing her as she laughed and prettily struggled.

"Shame o' tha face! Shame o' tha face, George!" she scolded and dimpled and blushed. "Wilt tha be done now? Wilt tha be done? I'll call mother."

And at that very moment mother came without being called, running, red of face, heavy-footed, and panting, with her cap all on one side.

"Th' duke's run away! Th' duke's run away!" she shouted. "Jo seed him. Pony got freetened at summat-- an' what art doin' here, George Bind? Get o' thy horse an' gallop. If he's killed, tha 'rt a ruined man."

There was an odd turn of chance in it, the duke thought afterward. Though friskier than usual, the Indolent Apprentice had behaved perfectly well until they neared the gates of Temple Barholm, which

chanced to be open because a cart had just passed through. And it was not the cart's fault, for the Indolent Apprentice regarded it with friendly interest. It happened, however, that perhaps being absorbed in the cart, which might have been drawn by a friend or even a distant relative, the Indolent Apprentice was horribly startled by a large rabbit which leaped out of the hedge almost under his nose, and, worse still, was followed the next instant by another rabbit even larger and more sudden and unexpected in its movements. The Indolent Apprentice snorted, pawed, whirled, dashed through the open gateway,--the duke's hands were even less strong than his daughter had thought,--and galloped, head in air and bit between teeth, up the avenue, the low carriage rocking from side to side.

"Damn! Damn!" cried the duke, rocking also. "Oh, damn! I shall be killed in a runaway perambulator!"

And ridiculous as it was, things surged through his brain, and once, though he laughed at himself bitterly afterward, he gasped "Ah, Heloise;" as he almost whirled over a jagged tree-stump; gallop and gallop and gallop, off the road and through trees, and back again on to the sward, and gallop and gallop and jerk and jolt and jerk, and he was nearing the house, and a long-legged young man ran down the steps, pushing aside footmen, and was ahead of the drunken little beast of a pony, and caught him just as the phaeton overturned and shot his grace safely though not comfortably in a heap upon the grass.

It was of course no trifle of a shock, but its victim's sensations gave him strong reason to hope, as he rolled over, that no bones were broken. The following servants were on the spot almost at once, and took the pony's head.

The young man helped the duke to his feet and dusted him with masterly dexterity. He did not know he was dusting a duke, and he would not have cared if he had.

"Hello," he said, "you're not hurt. I can see that. Thank the Lord! I don't believe you've got a scratch."

His grace felt a shade shaky, and he was slightly pale, but he smiled in a way which had been celebrated forty years earlier, and the charm of which had survived even rheumatic gout.

"Thank you. I'm not hurt in the least. I am the Duke of Stone. This isn't really a call. It isn't my custom to arrive in this way. May I address you as my preserver, Mr. Temple Barholm?"