CHAPTER XXV

It was Lady Mallowe who perceived the moment when he became the fashion. The Duke of Stone called with the immense formality he had described, and his visit was neither brief nor dull. A little later Tembarom with his guests dined at Stone Hover, and the dinner was further removed from dullness than any one of numerous past dinners always noted for being the most agreeable the neighborhood afforded. The duke managed his guest as an impresario might have managed his tenor, though this was done with subtly concealed methods. He had indeed a novelty to offer which had been discussed with much uncertainty of point of view. He presented it to an only languidly entertained neighborhood as a trouvaille of his own choice. Here was drama, here was atmosphere, here was charm verging in its character upon the occult. You would not see it if you were not a collector of such values.

"Nobody will be likely to see him as he is unless he is pointed out to them," was what he said to his daughters. "But being bored to death,--we are all bored,--once adroitly assisted to suspect him of being alluring, most of them will spring upon him and clasp him to their wearied breasts. I haven't the least idea what will happen afterward. I shall in fact await the result with interest."

Being told Palliser's story of the "Ladies," he listened, holding the

tips of his fingers together, and wearing an expression of deep interest slightly baffled in its nature. It was Lady Edith who related the anecdote to him.

"Now," he said, "it would be very curious and complicating if that were true; but I don't believe it is. Palliser, of course, likes to tell a good story. I shall be able to discover in time whether it is true or not; but at present I don't believe it."

Following the dinner party at Stone Hover came many others. All the well-known carriages began to roll up the avenue to Temple Barholm. The Temple Barholm carriages also began to roll down the avenue and between the stone griffins on their way to festive gatherings of varied order. Burrill and the footmen ventured to reconsider their early plans for giving warning. It wasn't so bad if the country was going to take him up.

"Do you see what is happening?" Lady Mallowe said to Joan. "The man is becoming actually popular."

"He is popular as a turn at a music hall is," answered Joan. "He will be dropped as he was taken up."

"There's something about him they like, and he represents what everybody most wants. For God's sake! Joan, don't behave like a fool this time. The case is more desperate. There is nothing else--

nothing."

"There never was," said Joan, " and I know the desperateness of the case. How long are you going to stay here?"

"I am going to stay for some time. They are not conventional people. It can be managed very well. We are relatives."

"Will you stay," inquired Joan in a low voice, "until they ask you to remove yourself?"

Lady Mallowe smiled an agreeably subtle smile.

"Not quite that," she answered. "Miss Alicia would never have the courage to suggest it. It takes courage and sophistication to do that sort of thing. Mr. Temple Barholm evidently wants us to remain. He will be willing to make as much of the relationship as we choose to let him."

"Do you choose to let him make as much of it as will establish us here for weeks--or months?" Joan asked, her low voice shaking a little.

"That will depend entirely upon circumstances. It will, in fact, depend entirely upon you," said Lady Mallowe, her lips setting themselves into a straight, thin line.

For an appreciable moment Joan was silent; but after it she lost her head and whirled about.

"I shall go away," she cried.

"Where?" asked Lady Mallowe.

"Back to London."

"How much money have you?" asked her mother. She knew she had none. She was always sufficiently shrewd to see that she had none. If the girl had had a pound a week of her own, her mother had always realized that she would have been unmanageable. After the Jem Temple Barholm affair she would have been capable of going to live alone in slums. As it was, she knew enough to be aware that she was too handsome to walk out into Piccadilly without a penny in her pocket; so it had been just possible to keep her indoors.

"How much money have you?" she repeated quietly. This was the way in which their unbearable scenes began--the scenes which the servants passing the doors paused to listen to in the hope that her ladyship would forget that raised voices may be heard by the discreet outsider.

"How much money have you?" she said again.

Joan looked at her; this time it was for about five seconds. She

turned her back on her and walked out of the room. Shortly afterward Lady Mallowe saw her walking down the avenue in the rain, which was beginning to fall.

She had left the house because she dared not stay in it. Once out in the park, she folded her long purple cloak about her and pulled her soft purple felt hat down over her brows, walking swiftly under the big trees without knowing where she intended to go before she returned. She liked the rain, she liked the heavy clouds; she wore her dark purples because she felt a fantastic, secret comfort in calling them her mourning --her mourning which she would wear forevermore.

No one could know so well as herself how desperate from her own point of view the case was. She had long known that her mother would not hesitate for a moment before any chance of a second marriage which would totally exclude her daughter from her existence. Why should she, after all, Joan thought? They had always been antagonists. The moment of chance had been looming on the horizon for months. Sir Moses Monaldini had hovered about fitfully and evidently doubtfully at first, more certainly and frequently of late, but always with a clearly objecting eye cast askance upon herself. With determination and desire to establish a social certainty, astute enough not to care specially for young beauty and exactions he did not purpose to submit to, and keen enough to see the advantage of a handsome woman with bitter reason to value what was offered to her in the form of a luxurious future, Sir Moses was moving toward action, though with

proper caution. He would have no penniless daughters hanging about scowling and sneering. None of that for him. And the ripest apple upon the topmost bow in the highest wind would not drop more readily to his feet than her mother would, Joan knew with sharp and shamed burnings.

As the rain fell, she walked in her purple cloak, unpaid for, and her purple hat, for which they had been dunned with threatening insults, and knew that she did not own and could not earn a penny. She could not dig, and to beg she was ashamed, and all the more horribly because she had been a beggar of the meaner order all her life. It made her sick to think of the perpetual visits they had made where they were not wanted, of the times when they had been politely bundled out of places, of the methods which had been used to induce shop-keepers to let them run up bills. For years her mother and she had been walking advertisements of smart shops because both were handsome, wore clothes well, and carried them where they would be seen and talked about. Now this would be all over, since it had been Lady Mallowe who had managed all details. Thrown upon her own resources, Joan would have none of them, even though she must walk in rags. Her education had prepared her for only one thing--to marry well, if luck were on her side. It had never been on her side. If she had never met Jem, she would have married somebody, since that would have been better than the inevitable last slide into an aging life spent in cheap lodgings with her mother. But Jem had been the beginning and the end.

She bit her lips as she walked, and suddenly tears swept down her

cheeks and dripped on to the purple cloth folded over her breast.

"And he sits in Jem's place! And every day that common, foolish stare will follow me!" she said.

He sat, it was true, in the place Jem Temple Barholm would have occupied if he had been a living man, and he looked at her a good deal. Perhaps he sometimes unconsciously stared because she made him think of many things. But if she had been in a state of mind admitting of judicial fairness, she would have been obliged to own that it was not quite a foolish stare. Absorbed, abstracted, perhaps, but it was not foolish. Sometimes, on the contrary, it was searching and keen.

Of course he was doing his best to please her. Of all the "Ladies," it seemed evident that he was most attracted by her. He tried to talk to her despite her unending rebuffs, he followed her about and endeavored to interest her, he presented a hide-bound unsensitiveness when she did her worst. Perhaps he did not even know that she was being icily rude. He was plainly "making up to her" after the manner of his class. He was perhaps playing the part of the patient adorer who melted by noble long-suffering in novels distinguished by heroes of humble origin.

She had reached the village when the rain changed its mind, and without warning began to pour down as if the black cloud passing overhead had suddenly opened. She was wondering if she would not turn in somewhere for shelter until the worst was over when a door opened

and Tembarom ran out with an umbrella.

"Come in to the Hibblethwaites cottage, Lady Joan," he said. "This will be over directly."

He did not affectionately hustle her in by the arm as he would have hustled in Miss Alicia, but he closely guarded her with the umbrella until he guided her inside.

"Thank you," she said.

The first object she became aware of was a thin face with pointed chin and ferret eyes peering at her round the end of a sofa, then a sharp voice.

"Tak' off her cloak an' shake th' rain off it in th' wash 'us'," it said. "Mother an' Aunt Susan's out. Let him unbutton it fer thee."

"I can unbutton it myself, thank you," said Lady Joan. Tembarom took it when she had unbuttoned it. He took it from her shoulders before she had time to stop him. Then he walked into the tiny "wash 'us" and shook it thoroughly. He came back and hung it on a chair before the fire.

Tummas was leaning back in his pillows and gazing at her.

"I know tha name," he said. "He towd me," with a jerk of the head toward Tembarom.

"Did he?" replied Lady Joan without interest.

A flaringly illustrated New York paper was spread out upon his sofa. He pushed it aside and pulled the shabby atlas toward him. It fell open at a map of North America as if through long habit.

"Sit thee down," he ordered.

Tembarom had stood watching them both.

"I guess you'd better not do that," he suggested to Tummas.

"Why not? " said the boy, sharply. "She's th' wench he was goin' to marry. It's th' same as if he'd married her. If she wur his widder, she'd want to talk about him. Widders allus wants to talk. Why shouldn't she? Women's women. He'd ha' wanted to talk about her."

"Who is `he'?" asked Joan with stiff lips.

"The Temple Barholm as' 'd be here if he was na."

Joan turned to Tembarom.

"Do you come here to talk to this boy about HIM?" she said. "How dare you!"

Tummas's eyes snapped; his voice snapped also.

"He knew next to nowt about him till I towd him," he said. "Then he came to ax me things an' foind out more. He knows as much as I do now. Us sits here an' talks him over."

Lady Joan still addressed Tembarom.

"What interest can you have in the man who ought to be in your place?" she asked. "What possible interest?"

"Well," he answered awkwardly, "because he ought to be, I suppose. Ain't that reason enough?"

He had never had to deal with women who hated him and who were angry and he did not know exactly what to say. He had known very few women, and he had always been good- natured with them and won their liking in some measure. Also, there was in his attitude toward this particular woman a baffled feeling that he could not make her understand him. She would always think of him as an enemy and believe he meant things he did not mean. If he had been born and educated in her world, he could have used her own language; but he could use only his own, and there were so many things he must not say for a time at least.

"Do you not realize," she said, "that you are presuming upon your position--that you and this boy are taking liberties?"

Tummas broke in wholly without compunction.

"I've taken liberties aw my loife," he stated, "an' I'm goin' to tak' 'em till I dee. They're th' on'y things I can tak', lyin' here crippled, an' I'm goin' to tak' 'em."

"Stop that, Tummas! " said Tembarom with friendly authority. "She doesn't catch on, and you don't catch on, either. You're both of you 'way off. Stop it!"

"I thought happen she could tell me things I didn't know," protested Tummas, throwing himself back on his pillows. "If she conna, she conna, an' if she wunnot, she wunnot. Get out wi' thee!" he said to Joan. "I dunnot want thee about th' place."

"Say," said Tembarom, "shut up!"

"I am going," said Lady Joan and turned to open the door.

The rain was descending in torrents, but she passed swiftly out into its deluge walking as rapidly as she could. She thought she cared nothing about the rain, but it dashed in her face and eyes, taking her breath away, and she had need of breath when her heart was beating

with such fierceness.

"If she wur his widder," the boy had said.

Even chance could not let her alone at one of her worst moments. She walked faster and faster because she was afraid Tembarom would follow her, and in a few minutes she heard him splashing behind her, and then he was at her side, holding the umbrella over her head.

"You're a good walker," he said, "but I'm a sprinter. I trained running after street cars and catching the 'L' in New York."

She had so restrained her miserable hysteric impulse to break down and utterly humiliate herself under the unexpected blow of the episode in the cottage that she had had no breath to spare when she left the room, and her hurried effort to escape had left her so much less that she did not speak.

"I'll tell you something," he went on. "He's a little freak, but you can't blame him much. Don't be mad at him. He's never moved from that corner since he was born, I guess, and he's got nothing to do or to think of but just hearing what's happening outside. He's sort of crazy curious, and when he gets hold of a thing that suits him he just holds on to it till the last bell rings."

She said nothing whatever, and he paused a moment because he wanted to

think over the best way to say the next thing.

"Mr. James Temple Barholm "--he ventured it with more delicacy of desire not to seem to "take liberties" than she would have credited him with--"saw his mother sitting with him in her arms at the cottage door a week or so after he was born. He stopped at the gate and talked to her about him, and he left him a sovereign. He's got it now. It seems a fortune to him. He's made a sort of idol of him. That's why he talks like he does. I wouldn't let it make me mad if I were you."

He did not know that she could not have answered him if she would, that she felt that if he did not stop she might fling herself down upon the wet heather and wail aloud.

"You don't like me," he began after they had walked a few steps farther. "You don't like me."

This was actually better. It choked back the sobs rising in her throat. The stupid shock of it, his tasteless foolishness, helped her by its very folly to a sort of defense against the disastrous wave of emotion she might not have been able to control. She gathered herself together.

"It must be an unusual experience," she answered.

"Well, it is--sort of," he said, but in a manner curiously free from

fatuous swagger. "I've had luck that way. I guess it's been because I'd GOT to make friends so as I could earn a living. It seems sort of queer to know that some one's got a grouch against me that--that I can't get away with."

She looked up the avenue to see how much farther they must walk together, since she was not "a sprinter" and could not get away from him. She thought she caught a glimpse through the trees of a dog-cart driven by a groom, and hoped she had not mistaken and that it was driving in their direction.

"It must, indeed," she said, "though I am not sure I quite understand what a grouch is."

"When you've got a grouch against a fellow," he explained impersonally, "you want to get at him. You want to make him feel like a mutt; and a mutt's the worst kind of a fool. You've got one against me."

She looked before her between narrowed lids and faintly smiled--the most disagreeable smile she was capable of. And yet for some too extraordinary reason he went on. But she had seen men go on before this when all the odds were against them. Sometimes their madness took them this way.

"I knew there was a lot against me when I came here," he persisted. "I

should have been a fool if I hadn't. I knew when you came that I was up against a pretty hard proposition; but I thought perhaps if I got busy and SHOWED you--you've got to SHOW a person--"

"Showed me what?" she asked contemptuously.

"Showed you--well--me," he tried to explain.

"You!"

"And that I wanted to be friends," he added candidly.

Was the man mad? Did he realize nothing? Was he too thick of skin even to see?

"Friends! You and I?" The words ought to have scorched him, pachyderm though he was.

"I thought you'd give me a chance--a sort of chance--"

She stopped short on the avenue.

"You did?"

She had not been mistaken. The dog-cart had rounded the far-off curve and was coming toward them. And the man went on talking.

"You've felt every minute that I was in a place that didn't belong to me. You know that if the man that it did belong to was here, you'd be here with him. You felt as if I'd robbed him of it--and I'd robbed you. It was your home--yours. You hated me too much to think of anything else. Suppose-- suppose there was a way I could give it back to you--make it your home again."

His voice dropped and was rather unsteady. The fool, the gross, brutal, vulgar, hopeless fool! He thought this was the way to approach her, to lead her to listen to his proposal of marriage! Not for a second did she guess that they were talking at cross purposes. She did not know that as he kept himself steady under her contemptuousness he was thinking that Ann would have to own that he had been up against it hard and plenty while the thing was going on.

"I'm always up against it when I'm talking to you," he said. "You get me rattled. There's things I want to talk about and ask you. Suppose you give me a chance, and let us start out by being sort of friends."

"I am staying in your house," she answered in a deadly voice, "and I cannot go away because my mother will not let me. You can force yourself upon me, if you choose, because I cannot help it; but understand once for all that I will not give you your ridiculous chance. And I will not utter one word to you when I can avoid it."

He was silent for a moment and seemed to be thinking rather deeply. She realized now that he saw the nearing dog-cart.

"You won't. Then it's up to me," he said. Then with a change of tone, he added, "I'll stop the cart and tell the man to drive you to the house. I'm not going to force myself on you, as you call it. It'd be no use. Perhaps it'll come all right in the end."

He made a sign to the groom, who hastened his horse's pace and drew up when he reached them.

"Take this lady back to the house," he said.

The groom, who was a new arrival, began to prepare to get down and give up his place.

"You needn't do that," said Tembarom.

"Won't you get up and take the reins, sir?" the man asked uncertainly.

"No. I can't drive. You'll have to do it. I'll walk."

And to the groom's amazement, they left him standing under the trees looking after them.

"It's up to me," he was saying. "The whole durned thing's up to me."