CHAPTER XXVI

The neighborhood of Temple Barholm was not, upon the whole, a brilliant one. Indeed, it had been frankly designated by the casual guest as dull. The country was beautiful enough, and several rather large estates lay within reach of one another, but their owners were neither very rich nor especially notable personages. They were of extremely good old blood, and were of established respectability. None of them, however, was given to entertaining house parties made up of the smart and dazzlingly sinful world of fashion said by moralists to be composed entirely of young and mature beauties, male and female, capable of supplying at any moment enlivening detail for the divorce court--glittering beings whose wardrobes were astonishing and whose conversations were composed wholly of brilliant paradox and sparkling repartee.

Most of the residents took their sober season in London, the men of the family returning gladly to their pheasants, the women not regretfully to their gardens and tennis, because their successes in town had not been particularly delirious. The guests who came to them were generally as respectable and law-abiding as themselves, and introduced no iconoclastic diversions. For the greater portion of the year, in fact, diners out were of the neighborhood and met the neighborhood, and were reduced to discussing neighborhood topics, which was not, on the whole, a fevered joy. The Duke of Stone was,

perhaps, the one man who might have furnished topics. Privately it was believed, and in part known, that he at least had had a brilliant, if not wholly unreprehensible, past. He might have introduced enlivening elements from London, even from Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Rome; but the sobering influence of years of rheumatic gout and a not entirely sufficing income prevented activities, and his opinions of his social surroundings were vaguely guessed to be those of a not too lenient critic.

"I do not know anything technical or scientific about ditch- water," he had expressed himself in the bosom of his family. "I never analyzed it, but analyzers, I gather, consider it dull. If anything could be duller than ditch-water, I should say it was Stone Hover and its surrounding neighborhood." He had also remarked at another time: "If our society could be enriched by some of the characters who form the house parties and seem, in fact, integral parts of all country society in modern problem or even unproblem novels, how happy one might be, how edified and amused! A wicked lady or so of high, or extremely low, rank, of immense beauty and corruscating brilliancy; a lovely creature, male or female, whom she is bent upon undoing--"

"Dear papa!" protested Lady Celia.

"Reproach me, dearest. Reproach me as severely as you please. It inspires me. It makes me feel like a wicked, dangerous man, and I have not felt like one for many years. Such persons as I describe form the

charm of existence, I assure you. A ruthless adventuress with any kind of good looks would be the making of us. Several of them, of different types, a handsome villain, and a few victims unknowing of their fate, would cause life to flow by like a peaceful stream."

Lady Edith laughed an unseemly little laugh--unseemly, since filial regret at paternal obliquity should have restrained it.

"Papa, you are quite horrible," she said. "You ought not to make your few daughters laugh at improper things."

"I would make my daughters laugh at anything so long as I must doom them to Stone Hover--and Lady Pevensy and Mrs. Stoughton and the rector, if one may mention names," he answered. "To see you laugh revives me by reminding me that once I was considered a witty person--quite so. Some centuries ago, however; about the time when things were being rebuilt after the flood."

In such circumstances it cannot be found amazing that a situation such as Temple Barholm presented should provide rich food for conversation, supposition, argument, and humorous comment.

T. Tembarom himself, after the duke had established him, furnished an unlimited source of interest. His household became a perennial fount of quiet discussion. Lady Mallowe and her daughter were the members of it who met with the most attention. They appeared to have become

members of it rather than visitors. Her ladyship had plainly elected to extend her stay even beyond the period to which a fond relative might feel entitled to hospitality. She had been known to extend visits before with great cleverness, but this one assumed an established aspect. She was not going away, the neighborhood decided, until she had achieved that which she had come to accomplish. The present unconventional atmosphere of the place naturally supported her. And how probable it seemed, taking into consideration Captain Palliser's story, that Mr. Temple Barholm wished her to stay. Lady Joan would be obliged to stay also, if her mother intended that she should. But the poor American--there were some expressions of sympathy, though the situation was greatly added to by the feature -- the poor American was being treated by Lady Joan as only she could treat a man. It was worth inviting the whole party to dinner or tea or lunch merely to see the two together. The manner in which she managed to ignore him and be scathing to him without apparently infringing a law of civility, and the number of laws she sometimes chose to sweep aside when it was her mood to do so, were extraordinary. If she had not been a beauty, with a sort of mystic charm for the male creature, surely he would have broken his chains. But he did not. What was he going to do in the end? What was she going to do? What was Lady Mallowe going to do if there was no end at all? He was not as unhappy-looking a lover as one might have expected, they said. He kept up his spirits wonderfully. Perhaps she was not always as icily indifferent to him as she chose to appear in public. Temple Barholm was a great estate, and Sir Moses Monaldini had been mentioned by rumor. Of course

there would be something rather strange and tragic in it if she came to Temple Barholm as its mistress in such singular circumstances. But he certainly did not look depressed or discouraged. So they talked it over as they looked on.

"How they gossip! How delightfully they gossip!" said the duke. "But it is such a perfect subject. They have never been so enthralled before. Dear young man! how grateful we ought to be for him!"

One of the most discussed features of the case was the duke's own cultivation of the central figure. There was an actual oddity about it. He drove from Stone Hover to Temple Barholm repeatedly. He invited Tembarom to the castle and had long talks with him--long, comfortable talks in secluded, delightful rooms or under great trees on a lawn. He wanted to hear anecdotes of his past, to draw him on to giving his points of view. When he spoke of him to his daughters, he called him "T. Tembarom," but the slight derision of his earlier tone modified itself.

"That delightful young man will shortly become my closest intimate," he said. "He not only keeps up my spirits, but he opens up vistas. Vistas after a man's seventy-second birthday! At times I could clasp him to my breast."

"I like him first rate," Tembarom said to Miss Alicia. "I liked him the minute he got up laughing like an old sport when he fell out of

the pony carriage."

As he became more intimate with him, he liked him still better. Obscured though it was by airy, elderly persiflage, he began to come upon a background of stability and points of view wholly to be relied on in his new acquaintance. It had evolved itself out of long and varied experience, with the aid of brilliant mentality. The old peer's reasons were always logical. He laughed at most things, but at a few he did not laugh at all. After several of the long conversations Tembarom began to say to himself that this seemed like a man you need not be afraid to talk things over with--things you didn't want to speak of to everybody.

"Seems to me," he said thoughtfully to Miss Alicia, "he's an old fellow you could tie to. I've got on to one thing when I've listened to him: he talks all he wants to and laughs a lot, but he never gives himself away. He wouldn't give another fellow away either if he said he wouldn't. He knows how not to."

There was an afternoon on which during a drive they took together the duke was enlightened as to several points which had given him cause for reflection, among others the story beloved of Captain Palliser and his audiences.

"I guess you've known a good many women," T. Tembarom remarked on this occasion after a few minutes of thought. "Living all over the world as

you've done, you'd be likely to come across a whole raft of them one time and another."

"A whole raft of them, one time and another," agreed the duke. "Yes."

"You've liked them, haven't you?"

"Immensely. Sometimes a trifle disastrously. Find me a more absolutely interesting object in the universe than a woman --any woman--and I will devote the remainder of my declining years to the study of it," answered his grace.

He said it with a decision which made T. Tembarom turn to look at him, and after his look decide to proceed.

"Have you ever known a bit of a slim thing"--he made an odd embracing gesture with his arm--"the size that you could pick up with one hand and set on your knee as if she was a child"--the duke remained still, knowing this was only the beginning and pricking up his ears as he took a rapid kaleidoscopic view of all the "Ladies" in the neighborhood, and as hastily waved them aside--"a bit of a thing that some way seems to mean it all to you--and moves the world?" The conclusion was one which brought the incongruous touch of maturity into his face.

"Not one of the `Ladies,"' the duke was mentally summing the matter

up. "Certainly not Lady Joan, after all. Not, I think, even the young person in the department store."

He leaned back in his corner the better to inspect his companion directly.

"You have, I see," he replied quietly. "Once I myself did." (He had cried out, "Ah! Heloise!" though he had laughed at himself when he seemed facing his ridiculous tragedy.)

"Yes," confessed T. Tembarom. "I met her at the boarding-house where I lived. Her father was a Lancashire man and an inventor. I guess you've heard of him; his name is Joseph Hutchinson."

The whole country had heard of him; more countries, indeed, than one had heard. He was the man who was going to make his fortune in America because T. Tembarom had stood by him in his extremity. He would make a fortune in America and another in England and possibly several others on the Continent. He had learned to read in the village school, and the girl was his daughter.

"Yes," replied the duke.

"I don't know whether the one you knew had that quiet little way of seeing right straight into a thing, and making you see it, too," said Tembarom.

"She had," answered the duke, and an odd expression wavered in his eyes because he was looking backward across forty years which seemed a hundred.

"That's what I meant by moving the world," T. Tembarom went on. "You know she's RIGHT, and you've got to do what she says, if you love her."

"And you always do," said the duke--"always and forever. There are very few. They are the elect."

T. Tembarom took it gravely.

"I said to her once that there wasn't more than one of her in the world because there couldn't be enough to make two of that kind. I wasn't joshing either; I meant it. It's her quiet little voice and her quiet, babyfied eyes that get you where you can't move. And it's something else you don't know anything about. It's her never doing anything for herself, but just doing it because it's the right thing for you."

The duke's chin had sunk a little on his breast, and looking back across the hundred years, he forgot for a moment where he was. The one he remembered had been another man's wife, a little angel brought up in a convent by white-souled nuns, passed over by her people to an

elderly vaurien of great magnificence, and she had sent the strong, laughing, impassioned young English peer away before it was too late, and with the young, young eyes of her looking upward at him in that way which saw "straight into a thing" and with that quiet little voice. So long ago! So long ago!

"Ah! Heloise!" he sighed unconsciously.

"What did you say?" asked T. Tembarom. The duke came back.

"I was thinking of the time when I was nine and twenty," he answered. "It was not yesterday nor even the day before. The one I knew died when she was twenty-four."

"Died!" said Tembarom. "Good Lord!" He dropped his head and even changed color. "A fellow can't get on to a thing like that. It seems as if it couldn't happen. Suppose--" he caught his breath hard and then pulled himself up-- "Nothing could happen to her before she knew that I've proved what I said--just proved it, and done every single thing she told me to do."

"I am sure you have," the duke said.

"It's because of that I began to say this." Tembarom spoke hurriedly that he might thrust away the sudden dark thought. "You're a man, and I'm a man; far away ahead of me as you are, you're a man, too. I was

crazy to get her to marry me and come here with me, and she wouldn't."

The duke's eyes lighted anew.

"She had her reasons," he said.

"She laid 'em out as if she'd been my mother instead of a little red-headed angel that you wanted to snatch up and crush up to you so she couldn't breathe. She didn't waste a word. She just told me what I was up against. She'd lived in the village with her grandmother, and she knew. She said I'd got to come and find out for myself what no one else could teach me. She told me about the kind of girls I'd see--beauties that were different from anything I'd ever seen before. And it was up to me to see all of them--the best of them."

"Ladies?" interjected the duke gently.

"Yes. With titles like those in novels, she said, and clothes like those in the Ladies' Pictorial. The kind of girls, she said, that would make her look like a housemaid. Housemaid be darned!" he exclaimed, suddenly growing hot. "I've seen the whole lot of them; I've done my darndest to get next, and there's not one--" he stopped short. "Why should any of them look at me, anyhow?" he added suddenly.

"That was not her point," remarked the duke. "She wanted you to look at them, and you have looked." T. Tembarom's eagerness was inspiring

to behold.

"I have, haven't I?" he cried. "That was what I wanted to ask you. I've done as she said. I haven't shirked a thing. I've followed them around when I knew they hadn't any use on earth for me. Some of them have handed me the lemon pretty straight. Why shouldn't they? But I don't believe she knew how tough it might be for a fellow sometimes."

"No, she did not," the duke said. "Also she probably did not know that in ancient days of chivalry ladies sent forth their knights to bear buffeting for their sakes in proof of fealty. Rise up, Sir Knight!" This last phrase of course T. Tembarom did not know the poetic significance of.

To his hearer Palliser's story became an amusing thing, read in the light of this most delicious frankness. It was Palliser himself who played the fool, and not T. Tembarom, who had simply known what he wanted, and had, with businesslike directness, applied himself to finding a method of obtaining it. The young women he gave his time to must be "Ladies" because Miss Hutchinson had required it from him. The female flower of the noble houses had been passed in review before him to practise upon, so to speak. The handsomer they were, the more dangerously charming, the better Miss Hutchinson would be pleased. And he had been regarded as a presumptuous aspirant. It was a situation for a comedy. But the "Ladies" would not enjoy it if they were told. It was also not the Duke of Stone who would tell them. They could not

in the least understand the subtlety of the comedy in which they had unconsciously taken part. Ann Hutchinson's grandmother curtsied to them in her stiff old way when they passed. Ann Hutchinson had gone to the village school and been presented with prizes for needlework and good behavior. But what a girl she must be, the slim bit of a thing with a red head! What a clear-headed and firm little person!

In courts he had learned to wear a composed countenance when he was prompted to smile, and he wore one now. He enjoyed the society of T. Tembarom increasingly every hour. He provided him with every joy.

Their drive was a long one, and they talked a good deal. They talked of the Hutchinsons, of the invention, of the business "deals" Tembarom had entered into at the outset, and of their tremendously encouraging result. It was not mere rumor that Hutchinson would end by being a rich man. The girl would be an heiress. How complex her position would be! And being of the elect who unknowingly bear with them the power that "moves the world," how would she affect Temple Barholm and its surrounding neighborhood?

"I wish to God she was here now! " exclaimed Tembarom, suddenly.

It had been an interesting talk, but now and then the duke had wondered if, as it went on, his companion was as wholly at his ease as was usual with him. An occasional shade of absorption in his expression, as if he were thinking of two things at once despite

himself, a hint of restlessness, revealed themselves occasionally. Was there something more he was speculating on the possibility of saying, something more to tell or explain? If there was, let him take his time. His audience, at all events, was possessed of perceptions. This somewhat abrupt exclamation might open the way.

"That is easily understood, my dear fellow," replied the duke.

"There's times when you want a little thing like that just to talk things over with, just to ask, because you--you're dead sure she'd never lose her head and give herself away without knowing she was doing it. She could just keep still and let the waves roll over her and be standing there ready and quiet when the tide had passed. It's the keeping your mouth shut that's so hard for most people, the not saying a darned thing, whatever happens, till just the right time."

"Women cannot often do it," said the duke. "Very few men can."

"You're right," Tembarom answered, and there was a trifle of anxiety in his tone.

"There's women, just the best kind, that you daren't tell a big thing to. Not that they'd mean to give it away--perhaps they wouldn't know when they did it--but they'd feel so anxious they'd get--they'd get--"

"Rattled," put in the duke, and knew who he was thinking of. He saw

Miss Alicia's delicate, timid face as he spoke.

T. Tembarom laughed.

"That's just it," he answered. "They wouldn't go back on you for worlds, but--well, you have to be careful with them."

"He's got something on his mind," mentally commented the duke. "He wonders if he will tell it to me."

"And there's times when you'd give half you've got to be able to talk a thing out and put it up to some one else for a while. I could do it with her. That's why I said I wish to God that she was here."

"You have learned to know how to keep still," the duke said. "So have I. We learned it in different schools, but we have both learned."

As he was saying the words, he thought he was going to hear something; when he had finished saying them he knew that he would without a doubt. T. Tembarom made a quick move in his seat; he lost a shade of color and cleared his throat as he bent forward, casting a glance at the backs of the coachman and footman on the high seat above them.

"Can those fellows hear me?" he asked.

"No," the duke answered; "if you speak as you are speaking now."

"You are the biggest man about here," the young man went on. "You stand for everything that English people care for, and you were born knowing all the things I don't. I've been carrying a big load for quite a while, and I guess I'm not big enough to handle it alone, perhaps. Anyhow, I want to be sure I'm not making fool mistakes. The worst of it is that I've got to keep still if I'm right, and I've got to keep still if I'm wrong. I've got to keep still, anyhow."

"I learned to hold my tongue in places where, if I had not held it, I might have plunged nations into bloodshed," the duke said. "Tell me all you choose."

As a result of which, by the time their drive had ended and they returned to Stone Hover, he had told him, and, the duke sat in his corner of the carriage with an unusual light in his eyes and a flush of somewhat excited color on his cheek.

"You're a queer fellow, T. Tembarom," he said when they parted in the drawing-room after taking tea. "You exhilarate me. You make me laugh. If I were an emotional person, you would at moments make me cry. There's an affecting uprightness about you. You're rather a fine fellow too, 'pon my life." Putting a waxen, gout-knuckled old hand on his shoulder, and giving him a friendly push which was half a pat, he added, "You are, by God!"

And after his guest had left him, the duke stood for some minutes gazing into the fire with a complicated smile and the air of a man who finds himself quaintly enriched.

"I have had ambitions in the course of my existence-- several of them," he said, "but even in over-vaulting moments never have I aspired to such an altitude as this--to be, as it were, part of a melodrama. One feels that one scarcely deserves it."