

## CHAPTER XXVIII

The popularity of Captain Palliser's story of the "Ladies" had been great at the outset, but with the passage of time it had oddly waned. This had resulted from the story's ceasing to develop itself, as the simplest intelligence might have anticipated, by means of the only person capable of its proper development. The person in question was of course T. Tembarom. Expectations, amusing expectations, of him had been raised, and he had singularly failed in the fulfilling of them. The neighborhood had, so to speak, stood upon tiptoe,--the feminine portion of it, at least,--looking over shoulders to get the first glimpses of what would inevitably take place.

As weeks flew by, the standing on tiptoe became a thing of the past. The whole thing flattened out most disappointingly. No attack whatever was made upon the "Ladies." That the Duke of Stone had immensely taken up Mr. Temple Barholm had of course resulted in his being accepted in such a manner as gave him many opportunities to encounter one and all. He appeared at dinners, teas, and garden parties. Miss Alicia, whom he had in some occult manner impressed upon people until they found themselves actually paying a sort of court to her, was always his companion.

"One realizes one cannot possibly leave her out of anything," had been said. "He has somehow established her as if she were his mother or his

aunt--or his interpreter. And such clothes, my dear, one doesn't behold. Worth and Paquin and Doucet must go sleepless for weeks to invent them. They are without a flaw in shade or line or texture." Which was true, because Mrs. Mellish of the Bond Street shop had become quite obsessed by her idea and committed extravagances Miss Alicia offered up contrite prayer to atone for, while Tembarom, simply chortling in his glee, signed checks to pay for their exquisite embodiment. That he was not reluctant to avail himself of social opportunities was made manifest by the fact that he never refused an invitation. He appeared upon any spot to which hospitality bade him, and unashamedly placed himself on record as a neophyte upon almost all occasions. His well-cut clothes began in time to wear more the air of garments belonging to him, but his hat made itself remarked by its trick of getting pushed back on his head or tilted on side, and his New York voice and accent rang out sharp and finely nasal in the midst of low-pitched, throaty, or mellow English enunciations. He talked a good deal at times because he found himself talked to by people who either wanted to draw him out or genuinely wished to hear the things he would be likely to say.

That the hero of Palliser's story should so comport himself as to provide either diversion or cause for haughty displeasure would have been only a natural outcome of his ambitions. In a brief period of time, however, every young woman who might have expected to find herself an object of such ambitions realized that his methods of approach and attack were not marked by the usual characteristics of

aspirants of his class. He evidently desired to see and be seen. He presented himself, as it were, for inspection and consideration, but while he was attentive, he did not press attentions upon any one. He did not make advances in the ordinary sense of the word. He never essayed flattering or even admiring remarks. He said queer things at which one often could not help but laugh, but he somehow wore no air of saying them with the intention of offering them as witticisms which might be regarded as allurements. He did not ogle, he did not simper or shuffle about nervously and turn red or pale, as eager and awkward youths have a habit of doing under the stress of unrequited admiration. In the presence of a certain slightingness of treatment, which he at the outset met with not infrequently, he conducted himself with a detached good nature which seemed to take but small account of attitudes less unoffending than his own. When the slightingness disappeared from sheer lack of anything to slight, he did not change his manner in any degree.

"He is not in the least forward," Beatrice Talchester said, the time arriving when she and her sisters occasionally talked him over with their special friends, the Granthams, "and he is not forever under one's feet, as the pushing sort usually is. Do you remember those rich people from the place they called Troy--the ones who took Burnaby for a year--and the awful eldest son who perpetually invented excuses for calling, bringing books and ridiculous things?"

"This one never makes an excuse," Amabel Grantham put in.

"But he never declines an invitation. There is no doubt that he wants to see people," said Lady Honora, with the pretty little nose and the dimples. She had ceased to turn up the pretty little nose, and she showed a dimple as she added: "Gwynedd is tremendously taken with him. She is teaching him to play croquet. They spend hours together."

"He's beginning to play a pretty good game," said Gwynedd. "He's not stupid, at all events."

"I believe you are the first choice, if he is really choosing," Amabel Grantham decided. "I should like to ask you a question."

"Ask it, by all means," said Gwynedd.

"Does he ever ask you to show him how to hold his mallet, and then do idiotic things, such as managing to touch your hand?"

"Never," was Gwynedd's answer. "The young man from Troy used to do it, and then beg pardon and turn red."

"I don't understand him, or I don't understand Captain Palliser's story," Amabel Grantham argued. "Lucy and I are quite out of the running, but I honestly believe that he takes as much notice of us as he does of any of you. If he has intentions, he 'doesn't act the part,' which is pure New York of the first water."

"He said, however, that the things that mattered were not only titles, but looks. He asked how many of us were 'lookers.' Don't be modest, Amabel. Neither you nor Lucy are out of the running," Beatrice amiably suggested.

"Ladies first," commented Amabel, pertly. There was no objection to being supported in one's suspicion that, after all, one was a "looker."

"There may be a sort of explanation," Honora put the idea forward somewhat thoughtfully. "Captain Palliser insists that he is much shrewder than he seems. Perhaps he is cautious, and is looking us all over before he commits himself."

"He is a Temple Barholm, after all," said Gwynedd, with boldness. "He's rather good looking. He has the nicest white teeth and the most cheering grin I ever saw, and he's as 'rich as grease is,' as I heard a housemaid say one day. I'm getting quite resigned to his voice, or it is improving, I don't know which. If he only knew the mere A B C of ordinary people like ourselves, and he committed himself to me, I wouldn't lay my hand on my heart and say that one might not think him over."

"I told you she was tremendously taken with him," said her sister.

"It's come to this."

"But," said Lady Gwynedd, "he is not going to commit himself to any of us, incredible as it may seem. The one person he stares at sometimes is Joan Fayre, and he only looks at her as if he were curious and wouldn't object to finding out why she treats him so outrageously. He isn't annoyed; he's only curious."

"He's been adored by salesladies in New York," said Honora, "and he can't understand it."

"He's been liked," Amabel Grantham summed him up. "He's a likable thing. He's even rather a dear. I've begun to like him myself."

"I hear you are learning to play croquet," the Duke of Stone remarked to him a day or so later. "How do you like it?"

"Lady Gwynedd Talchester is teaching me," Tembarom answered. "I'd learn to iron shirt-waists if she would give me lessons. She's one of the two that have dimples," he added, reflection in his tone. "I guess that'll count. Shouldn't you think it would?"

"Miss Hutchinson?" queried the duke.

Tembarom nodded.

"Yes, it's always her," he answered without a ray of humor. "I just

want to stack 'em up."

"You are doing it," the duke replied with a slightly twisted mouth. There were, in fact, moments when he might have fallen into fits of laughter while Tembarom was seriousness itself. "I must, however, call your attention to the fact that there is sometimes in your manner a hint of a businesslike pursuit of a fixed object which you must beware of. The Lady Gwynedds might not enjoy the situation if they began to suspect. If they decided to flout you,--'to throw you down,' I ought to say--where would little Miss Hutchinson be?"

Tembarom looked startled and disturbed.

"Say," he exclaimed, "do I ever look that way? I must do better than that. Anyhow, it ain't all put on. I'm doing my stunt, of course, but I like them. They're mighty nice to me when you consider what they're up against. And those two with the dimples,--Lady Gwynned and Lady Honora, are just peaches. Any fellow might"--he stopped and looked serious again--"That's why they'd count," he added.

They were having one of their odd long talks under a particularly splendid copper beech which provided the sheltered out-of-door corner his grace liked best. When they took their seats together in this retreat, it was mysteriously understood that they were settling themselves down to enjoyment of their own, and must not be disturbed.

"When I am comfortable and entertained," Moffat, the house steward, had quoted his master as saying, "you may mention it if the castle is in flames; but do not annoy me with excitement and flurry. Ring the bell in the courtyard, and call up the servants to pass buckets; but until the lawn catches fire, I must insist on being left alone."

"What dear papa talks to him about, and what he talks about to dear papa," Lady Celia had more than once murmured in her gently remote, high-nosed way, "I cannot possibly imagine. Sometimes when I have passed them on my way to the croquet lawn I have really seen them both look as absorbed as people in a play. Of course it is very good for papa. It has had quite a marked effect on his digestion. But isn't it odd!"

"I wish," Lady Edith remarked almost wistfully, "that I could get on better with him myself conversationally. But I don't know what to talk about, and it makes me nervous."

Their father, on the contrary, found in him unique resources, and this afternoon it occurred to him that he had never so far heard him express himself freely on the subject of Palliser. If led to do so, he would probably reveal that he had views of Captain Palliser of which he might not have been suspected, and the manner in which they would unfold themselves would more than probably be illuminating. The duke was, in fact, serenely sure that he required neither warning nor advice, and he had no intention of offering either. He wanted to hear



the views.

"Do you know," he said as he stirred his tea, "I've been thinking about Palliser, and it has occurred to me more than once that I should like to hear just how he strikes you?"

"What I got on to first was how I struck him," answered Tembarom, with a reasonable air. "That was dead easy."

There was no hint of any vaunt of superior shrewdness. His was merely the level-toned manner of an observer of facts in detail.

"He has given you an opportunity of seeing a good deal of him," the duke added. "What do you gather from him-- unless he has made up his mind that you shall not gather anything at all?"

"A fellow like that couldn't fix it that way, however much he wanted to," Tembarom answered again reasonably. "Just his trying to do it would give him away."

"You mean you have gathered things?"

"Oh, I've gathered enough, though I didn't go after it. It hung on the bushes. Anyhow, it seemed to me that way. I guess you run up against that kind everywhere. There's stacks of them in New York--different shapes and sizes."

"If you met a man of his particular shape and size in New York, how would you describe him?" the duke asked.

"I should never have met him when I was there. He wouldn't have come my way. He'd have been on Wall Street, doing high-class bucket-shop business, or he'd have had a swell office selling copper-mines--any old kind of mine that's going to make ten million a minute, the sort of deal he's in now. If he'd been the kind I might have run up against," he added with deliberation, "he wouldn't have been as well dressed or as well spoken. He'd have been either flashy or down at heel. You'd have called him a crook."

The duke seemed pleased with his tea as, after having sipped it, he put it down on the table at his side.

"A crook?" he repeated. "I wonder if that word is altogether American?"

"It's not complimentary, but you asked me," said Tembarom. "But I don't believe you asked me because you thought I wasn't on to him."

"Frankly speaking, no," answered the duke. "Does he talk to you about the mammoth mines and the rubber forests?"

"Say, that's where he wins out with me," Tembarom replied admiringly.

"He gets in such fine work that I switch him on to it whenever I want cheering up. It makes me sorter forget things that worry me just to see a man act the part right up to the top notch the way he does it. The very way his clothes fit, the style he's got his hair brushed, and that swell, careless lounge of his, are half of the make-up. You see, most of us couldn't mistake him for anything else but just what he looks like--a gentleman visiting round among his friends and a million miles from wanting to butt in with business. The thing that first got me interested was watching how he slid in the sort of guff he wanted you to get worked up about and think over. Why, if I'd been what I look like to him, he'd have had my pile long ago, and he wouldn't be loafing round here any more."

"What do you think you look like to him?" his host inquired.

"I look as if I'd eat out of his hand," Tembarom answered, quite unbiased by any touch of wounded vanity. "Why shouldn't I? And I'm not trying to wake him up, either. I like to look that way to him and to his sort. It gives me a chance to watch and get wise to things. He's a high-school education in himself. I like to hear him talk. I asked him to come and stay at the house so that I could hear him talk."

"Did he introduce the mammoth mines in his first call?" the duke inquired.

"Oh, I don't mean that kind of talk. I didn't know how much good I was

going to get out of him at first. But he was the kind I hadn't known, and it seemed like he was part of the whole thing--like the girls with title that Ann said I must get next to. And an easy way of getting next to the man kind was to let him come and stay. He wanted to, all right. I guess that's the way he lives when he's down on his luck, getting invited to stay at places. Like Lady Mallowe," he added, quite without prejudice.

"You do sum them up, don't you?" smiled the duke.

"Well, I don't see how I could help it," he said impartially. "They're printed in sixty-four point black-face, seems to me."

"What is that?" the duke inquired with interest. He thought it might be a new and desirable bit of slang. "I don't know that one."

"Biggest type there is," grinned Tembarom. "It's the kind that's used for head-lines. That's newspaper-office talk."

"Ah, technical, I see. What, by the way, is the smallest lettering called?" his grace followed up.

"Brilliant," answered Tembarom.

"You," remarked the duke, "are not printed in sixty-four-point black-face so far as they are concerned. You are not even brilliant. They

don't find themselves able to sum you up. That fact is one of my recreations."

"I'll tell you why," Tembarom explained with his clearly unprejudiced air. "There's nothing much about me to sum up, anyhow. I'm too sort of plain sailing and ordinary. I'm not making for anywhere they'd think I'd want to go. I'm not hiding anything they'd be sure I'd want to hide."

"By the Lord! you're not!" exclaimed the duke.

"When I first came here, every one of them had a fool idea I'd want to pretend I'd never set eyes on a newsboy or a boot-black, and that I couldn't find my way in New York when I got off Fifth Avenue. I used to see them thinking they'd got to look as if they believed it, if they wanted to keep next. When I just let out and showed I didn't care a darn and hadn't sense enough to know that it mattered, it nearly made them throw a fit. They had to turn round and fix their faces all over again and act like it was 'interesting.' That's what Lady Mallowe calls it. She says it's so 'interesting!'"

"It is," commented the duke.

"Well, you know that, but she doesn't. Not on your life! I guess it makes her about sick to think of it and have to play that it's just what you'd want all your men friends to have done. Now, Palliser--" he

paused and grinned again. He was sitting in a most casual attitude, his hands clasped round one up-raised knee, which he nursed, balancing himself. It was a position of informal ease which had an air of assisting enjoyable reflection.

"Yes, Palliser? Don't let us neglect Palliser," his host encouraged him.

"He's in a worse mix-up than the rest because he's got more to lose. If he could work this mammoth-mine song and dance with the right people, there'd be money enough in it to put him on Easy Street. That's where he's aiming for. The company's just where it has to have a boost. It's just GOT to. If it doesn't, there'll be a bust up that may end in fitting out a high-toned promoter or so in a striped yellow-and-black Jersey suit and set him to breaking rocks or playing with oakum. I'll tell you, poor old Palliser gets the Willies sometimes after he's read his mail. He turns the color of ecru baby Irish. That's a kind of lace I got a dressmaker to tell me about when I wrote up receptions and dances for the Sunday Earth. Ecru baby Irish--that's Palliser's color after he's read his letters."

"I dare say the fellow's in a devil of a mess, if the truth were known," the duke said.

"And here's 'T. T.,' hand-made and hand-painted for the part of the kind of sucker he wants." T. Tembarom's manner was almost sympathetic

in its appreciation. "I can tell you I'm having a real good time with Palliser. It looked like I'd just dropped from heaven when he first saw me. If he'd been the praying kind, I'd have been just the sort he'd have prayed for when he said his 'Now-I-lay-me's' before he went to bed. There wasn't a chance in a hundred that I wasn't a fool that had his head swelled so that he'd swallow any darned thing if you handed it to him smooth enough. First time he called he asked me a lot of questions about New York business. That was pretty smart of him. He wanted to find out, sort of careless, how much I knew--or how little."

The duke was leaning back luxuriously in his chair and gazing at him as he might have gazed at the work of an old master of which each line and shade was of absorbing interest.

"I can see him," he said. "I can see him."

"He found out I knew nothing," Tembarom continued. "And what was to hinder him trying to teach me something, by gee! Nothing on top of the green earth. I was there, waiting with my mouth open, it seemed like."

"And he has tried--in his best manner?" said his grace.

"What he hasn't tried wouldn't be worthy trying," Tembarom answered cheerfully. "Sometimes it seems like a shame to waste it. I've got so I know how to start him when he doesn't know I'm doing it. I tell you, he's fine. Gentlemanly --that's his way, you know. High-toned friend

that just happens to know of a good thing and thinks enough of you in a sort of reserved way to feel like it's a pity not to give you a chance to come in on the ground floor, if you've got the sense to see the favor he's friendly enough to do you. It's such a favor that it'd just disgust a man if you could possibly turn it down. But of course you're to take it or leave it. It's not to his interest to push it. Lord, no! Whatever you did his way is that he'd not condescend to say a darned word. High-toned silence, that's all."

The Duke of Stone was chuckling very softly. His chuckles rather broke his words when he spoke.

"By--by--Jove!" he said. "You--you do see it, don't you? You do see it."

Tembarom nursed his knee comfortably.

"Why," he said, "it's what keeps me up. You know a lot more about me than any one else does, but there's a whole raft of things I think about that I couldn't hang round any man's neck. If I tried to hang them round yours, you'd know that I would be having a hell of a time here, if I'd let myself think too much. If I didn't see it, as you call it, if I didn't see so many things, I might begin to get sorry for myself. There was a pause of a second. "Gee!" he said, "Gee! this not hearing a thing about Ann!--"



"Good Lord! my dear fellow," the duke said hastily, "I know. I know."

Tembarom turned and looked at him.

"You've been there," he remarked. "You've been there, I bet."

"Yes, I've been there," answered the duke. "I've been there--and come back. But while it's going on--you have just described it. A man can have a hell of a time."

"He can," Tembarom admitted unreservedly. "He's got to keep going to stand it. Well, Strangeways gives me some work to do. And I've got Palliser. He's a little sunbeam."

A man-servant approaching to suggest a possible need of hot tea started at hearing his grace break into a sudden and plainly involuntary crow of glee. He had not heard that one before either. Palliser as a little sunbeam brightening the pathway of T. Tembarom, was, in the particular existing circumstances, all that could be desired of fine humor. It somewhat recalled the situation of the "Ladies" of the noble houses of Pevensy, Talchester, and Stone unconsciously passing in review for the satisfaction of little Miss Hutchinson. Tembarom laughed a little himself, but he went on with a sort of seriousness

"There's one thing sure enough. I've got on to it by listening and working out what he would do by what he doesn't know he says. If he could put the screws on me in any way, he wouldn't hold back. It'd be all quite polite and gentlemanly, but he'd do it all the same. And he's dead-sure that everybody's got something they'd like to hide--or get. That's what he works things out from."

"Does he think you have something to hide--or get?" the duke inquired rather quickly.

"He's sure of it. But he doesn't know yet whether it's get or hide. He noses about. Pearson's seen him. He asks questions and plays he ain't doing it and ain't interested, anyhow."

"He doesn't like you, he doesn't like you," the duke said rather thoughtfully. "He has a way of conveying that you are far more subtle than you choose to look. He is given to enlarging on the fact that an air of entire frankness is one of the chief assets of certain promoters of huge American schemes."

Tembarom smiled the smile of recognition.

"Yes," he said, "it looks like that's a long way round, doesn't it? But it's not far to T. T. when you want to hitch on the connection. Anyhow, that's the way he means it to look. If ever I was suspected of being in any mix-up, everybody would remember he'd said that."

"It's very amusin'," said the duke. " It's very amusin'."

They had become even greater friends and intimates by this time than the already astonished neighborhood suspected them of being. That they spent much time together in an amazing degree of familiarity was the talk of the country, in fact, one of the most frequent resources of conversation. Everybody endeavored to find reason for the situation, but none had been presented which seemed of sufficiently logical convincingness. The duke was eccentric, of course. That was easy to hit upon. He was amiably perverse and good-humoredly cynical. He was of course immensely amused by the incongruity of the acquaintance. This being the case, why exactly he had never before chosen for himself a companion equally out of the picture it was not easy to explain. There were plow-boys or clerks out of provincial shops who would surely have been quite as incongruous when surrounded by ducal splendors. He might have got a young man from Liverpool or Blackburn who would have known as little of polite society as Mr. Temple Barholm; there were few, of course, who could know less. But he had never shown the faintest desire to seek one out. Palliser, it is true, suggested it was Tembarom's "cheek" which stood him in good stead. The young man from behind the counter in a Liverpool or Blackburn shop would probably have been frightened to death and afraid to open his mouth in self-revelation, whereas Temple Barholm was so entirely a bounder that he did not know he was one, and was ready to make an ass of himself to any extent. The frankest statement of the situation, if

any one had so chosen to put it, would have been that he was regarded as a sort of court fool without cap or bells.

No one was aware of the odd confidences which passed between the weirdly dissimilar pair. No one guessed that the old peer sat and listened to stories of a red-headed, slim-bodied girl in a dingy New York boarding-house, that he liked them sufficiently to encourage their telling, that he had made a mental picture of a certain look in a pair of maternally yearning and fearfully convincing round young eyes, that he knew the burnished fullness and glow of the red hair until he could imagine the feeling of its texture and abundant warmth in the hand. And this subject was only one of many. And of others they talked with interest, doubt, argument, speculation, holding a living thrill.

The tap of croquet mallets sounded hollow and clear from the sunken lawn below the mass of shrubs between them and the players as the duke repeated.

"It's hugely amusin'," dropping his "g," which was not one of his usual affectations.

"Confound it!" he said next, wrinkling the thin, fine skin round his eyes in a speculative smile, "I wish I had had a son of my own just like you."

All of Tembarom's white teeth revealed themselves.

"I'd have liked to have been in it," he replied, "but I shouldn't have been like me."

"Yes, you would." The duke put the tips of his fingers delicately together. "You are of the kind which in all circumstances is like itself." He looked about him, taking in the turreted, majestic age and mass of the castle. "You would have been born here. You would have learned to ride your pony down the avenue. You would have gone to Eton and to Oxford. I don't think you would have learned much, but you would have been decidedly edifying and companionable. You would have had a sense of humor which would have made you popular in society and at court. A young fellow who makes those people laugh holds success in his hand. They want to be made to laugh as much as I do. Good God! how they are obliged to be bored and behave decently under it! You would have seen and known more things to be humorous about than you know now. I don't think you would have been a fool about women, but some of them would have been fools about you, because you've got a way. I had one myself. It's all the more dangerous because it's possibility suggesting without being sentimental. A friendly young fellow always suggests possibilities without being aware of it.

"Would I have been Lord Temple Temple Barholm or something of that sort?" Tembarom asked.

"You would have been the Marquis of Belcarey," the duke replied, looking him over thoughtfully, "and your name would probably have been Hugh Lawrence Gilbert Henry Charles Adelbert, or words to that effect."

"A regular six-shooter," said Tembarom.

The duke was following it up with absorption in his eyes.

"You'd have gone into the Guards, perhaps," he said, "and drill would have made you carry yourself better. You're a good height. You'd have been a well-set-up fellow. I should have been rather proud of you. I can see you riding to the palace with the rest of them, sabres and chains clanking and glittering and helmet with plumes streaming. By Jove! I don't wonder at the effect they have on nursery-maids. On a sunny morning in spring they suggest knights in a fairytale."

"I should have liked it all right if I hadn't been born in Brooklyn," grinned Tembarom. "But that starts you out in a different way. Do you think, if I'd been born the Marquis of Bel--what's his name--I should have been on to Palliser's little song and dance, and had as much fun out of it?"

"On my soul, I believe you would," the duke answered. "Brooklyn or Stone Hover Castle, I'm hanged if you wouldn't have been YOU."