CHAPTER XXXIV

After this climax the interview was not so long as it was interesting. Two men as far apart as the poles, as remote from each other in mind and body, in training and education or lack of it, in desires and intentions, in points of view and trend of being, as nature and circumstances could make them, talked in a language foreign to each other of a wildly strange thing. Palliser's arguments and points of aspect were less unknown to T. Tembarom than his own were to Palliser. He had seen something very like them before, though they had developed in different surroundings and had been differently expressed. The colloquialism "You're not doing that for your health" can be made to cover much ground in the way of the stripping bare of motives for action. This was what, in excellent and well-chosen English, Captain Palliser frankly said to his host. Of nothing which T. Tembarom said to him in his own statement did he believe one word or syllable. The statement in question was not long or detailed. It was, of course, Palliser saw, a ridiculously impudent flinging together of a farrago of nonsense, transparent in its effort beyond belief. Before he had listened five minutes with the distinctly "nasty" smile, he burst out laughing.

"That is a good `spiel,' my dear chap," he said. "It's as good a `spiel' as your typewriter friend used to rattle off when he thought he saw a customer; but I'm not a customer."

Tembarom looked at him interestedly for about ten seconds. His hands were thrust into his trousers pockets, as was his almost invariable custom. Absorption and speculation, even emotion and excitement, were usually expressed in this unconventional manner.

"You don't believe a darned word of it," was his sole observation.

"Not a darned word," Palliser smiled. "You are trying a `bluff,' which doesn't do credit to your usual sharpness. It's a bluff that is actually silly. It makes you look like an ass."

"Well, it's true," said Tembarom; "it's true."

Palliser laughed again.

"I only said it made you look like an ass," he remarked. "I don't profess to understand you altogether, because you are a new species. Your combination of ignorance and sharpness isn't easy to calculate on. But there is one thing I have found out, and that is, that when you want to play a particular sharp trick you are willing to let people take you for a fool. I'll own you've deceived me once or twice, even when I suspected you. I've heard that's one of the most successful methods used in the American business world. That's why I

only say you look like an ass. You are an ass in some respects; but you are letting yourself look like one now for some shrewd end. You either think you'll slip out of danger by it when I make this discovery public, or you think you'll somehow trick me into keeping my mouth shut."

"I needn't trick you into keeping your mouth shut," Tembarom suggested. "There's a straightway to do that, ain't there?" And he indelicately waved his hand toward the documents pertaining to the Cedric Company.

It was stupid as well as gross, in his hearer's opinion. If he had known what was good for him he would have been clever enough to ignore the practical presentation of his case made half an hour or so earlier.

"No, there is not," Palliser replied, with serene mendacity. "No suggestion of that sort has been made. My business proposition was given out on an entirely different basis. You, of course, choose to put your personal construction upon it."

"Gee whiz!" ejaculated T. Tembarom. "I was 'way off, wasn't I?"

"I told you that professing to be an ass wouldn't be good enough in this case. Don't go on with it," said Palliser, sharply.

"You're throwing bouquets. Let a fellow be natural," said Tembarom.

"That is bluff, too," Palliser replied more sharply still. "I am not taken in by it, bold as it is. Ever since you came here, you have been playing this game. It was your fool's grin and guffaw and pretense of good nature that first made me suspect you of having something up your sleeve. You were too unembarrassed and candid."

"So you began to look out," Tembarom said, considering him curiously, "just because of that." Then suddenly he laughed outright, the fool's guffaw.

It somehow gave Palliser a sort of puzzled shock. It was so hearty that it remotely suggested that he appeared more secure than seemed possible. He tried to reply to him with a languid contempt of manner.

"You think you have some tremendously sharp `deal' in your hand," he said, "but you had better remember you are in England where facts are like sledge-hammers. You can't dodge from under them as you can in America. I dare say you won't answer me, but I should like to ask you what you propose to do."

"I don't know what I'm going to do any more than you do," was the unilluminating answer. "I don't mind telling you that."

"And what do you think he will do?"

"I've got to wait till I find out. I'm doing it. That was what I told you. What are you going to do?" he added casually.

"I'm going to Lincoln's Inn Fields to have an interview with Palford & Grimby."

"That's a good enough move," commented Tembarom, "if you think you can prove what you say. You've got to prove things, you know. I couldn't, so I lay low and waited, just like I told you."

"Of course, of course," Palliser himself almost grinned in his derision. "You have only been waiting."

"When you've got to prove a thing, and haven't much to go on, you've got to wait," said T. Tembarom--"to wait and keep your mouth shut, whatever happens, and to let yourself be taken for a fool or a horse-thief isn't as gilt-edged a job as it seems. But proof's what it's best to have before you ring up the curtain. You'd have to have it yourself. So would Palford & Grimby before it'd be stone-cold safe to rush things and accuse a man of a penitentiary offense."

He took his unconventional half-seat on the edge of the table, with one foot on the floor and the other one lightly swinging.

"Palford & Grimby are clever old ducks, and they know that much. Thing

they'd know best would be that to set a raft of lies going about a man who's got money enough to defend himself, and to make them pay big damages for it afterward, would be pretty bum business. I guess they know all about what proof stands for. They may have to wait; so may you, same as I have."

Palliser realized that he was in the position of a man striking at an adversary whose construction was of India-rubber. He struck home, but left no bruise and drew no blood, which was an irritating thing. He lost his temper.

"Proof!" he jerked out. "There will be proof enough, and when it is made public, you will not control the money you threaten to use."

"When you get proof, just you let me hear about it," T. Tembarom said. "And all the money I'm threatening on shall go where it belongs, and I'll go back to New York and sell papers if I have to. It won't come as hard as you think."

The flippant insolence with which he brazened out his pretense that he had not lied, that his ridiculous romance was actual and simple truth, suggested dangerous readiness of device and secret knowledge of power which could be adroitly used.

"You are merely marking time," said Palliser, rising, with cold determination to be juggled with no longer. "You have hidden him away

where you think you can do as you please with a man who is an invalid. That is your dodge. You've got him hidden somewhere, and his friends had better get at him before it is too late."

"I'm not answering questions this evening, and I'm not giving addresses, though there are no witnesses to take them down. If he's hidden away, he's where he won't be disturbed," was T. Tembarom's rejoinder. "You may lay your bottom dollar on that."

Palliser walked toward the door without speaking. He had almost reached it when he whirled about involuntarily, arrested by a shout of laughter.

"Say," announced Tembarom, "you mayn't know it, but this lay-out would make a first-rate turn in a vaudeville. You think I'm lying, I look like I'm lying, I guess every word I say sounds like I'm lying. To a fellow like you, I guess it couldn't help but sound that way. And I'm not lying. That's where the joke comes in. I'm not lying. I've not told you all I know because it's none of your business and wouldn't help; but what I have told you is the stone-cold truth."

He was keeping it up to the very end with a desperate determination not to let go his hold of his pose until he had made his private shrewd deal, whatsoever it was. At least, so it struck Palliser, who merely said:

"I 'm leaving the house by the first train to-morrow morning." He fixed a cold gray eye on the fool's grin.

"Six forty-five," said T. Tembarom. "I'll order the carriage. I might go up myself."

The door closed.

Tembarom was looking cheerful enough when he went into his bedroom. He had become used to its size and had learned to feel that it was a good sort of place. It had the hall bedroom at Mrs. Bowse's boarding-house "beaten to a frazzle." There was about everything in it that any man could hatch up an idea he'd like to have. He had slept luxuriously on the splendid carved bed through long nights, he had lain awake and thought out things on it, he had lain and watched the fire-light flickering on the ceiling, as he thought about Ann and made plans, and "fixed up" the Harlem flat which could be run on fifteen per. He had picked out the pieces of furniture from the Sunday Earth advertisement sheet, and had set them in their places. He always saw the six-dollar mahogany-stained table set for supper, with Ann at one end and himself at the other. He had grown actually fond of the old room because of the silence and comfort of it, which tended to give reality to his dreams. Pearson, who had ceased to look anxious, and who had acquired fresh accomplishments in the form of an entirely new set of duties, was waiting, and handed him a telegram.

"This just arrived, sir," he explained. "James brought it here because he thought you had come up, and I didn't send it down because I heard you on the stairs."

"That's right. Thank you, Pearson," his master said.

He tore the yellow envelop, and read the message. In a moment Pearson knew it was not an ordinary message, and therefore remained more than ordinarily impassive of expression. He did not even ask of himself what it might convey.

Mr. Temple Barholm stood still a few seconds, with the look of a man who must think and think rapidly.

"What is the next train to London, Pearson?" he asked.

"There is one at twelve thirty-six, sir," he answered. "It's the last till six in the morning. You have to change at Crowley."

"You're always ready, Pearson," returned Mr. Temple Barholm. "I want to get that train."

Pearson was always ready. Before the last word was quite spoken he had turned and opened the bedroom door.

"I'll order the dog-cart; that's quickest, sir," he said. He was out of the room and in again almost immediately. Then he was at the wardrobe and taking out what Mr. Temple Barholm called his "grip," but what Pearson knew as a Gladstone bag. It was always kept ready packed for unexpected emergencies of travel.

Mr. Temple Barholm sat at the table and drew pen and paper toward him. He looked excited; he looked more troubled than Pearson had seen him look before.

"The wire's from Sir Ormsby Galloway, Pearson," he said.

"It's about Mr. Strangeways. He's done what I used to be always watching out against: he's disappeared."

"Disappeared, sir!" cried Pearson, and almost dropped the Gladstone bag. "I beg pardon, sir. I know there's no time to lose." He steadied the bag and went on with his task without even turning round.

His master was in some difficulty. He began to write, and after dashing off a few words, stopped, and tore them up.

"No," he muttered, "that won't do. There's no time to explain." Then he began again, but tore up his next lines also.

"That says too much and not enough. It'd frighten the life out of

her."

He wrote again, and ended by folding the sheet and putting it into an envelop.

"This is a message for Miss Alicia," he said to Pearson. "Give it to her in the morning. I don't want her to worry because I had to go in a hurry. Tell her everything's going to be all right; but you needn't mention that anything's happened to Mr. Strangeways."

"Yes, sir," answered Pearson.

Mr. Temple Barholm was already moving about the room, doing odd things for himself rapidly, and he went on speaking.

"I want you and Rose to know," he said, "that whatever happens, you are both fixed all right--both of you. I've seen to that."

"Thank you, sir," Pearson faltered, made uneasy by something new in his tone. "You said whatever happened, sir--"

"Whatever old thing happens," his master took him up.

"Not to you, sir. Oh, I hope, sir, that nothing--"

Mr. Temple Barholm put a cheerful hand on his shoulder.

"Nothing's going to happen that'll hurt any one. Things may change, that's all. You and Rose are all right, Miss Alicia's all right, I'm all right. Come along. Got to catch that train."'

In this manner he took his departure.

Miss Alicia had from necessity acquired the habit of early rising at Rowcroft vicarage, and as the next morning was bright, she was clipping roses on a terrace before breakfast when Pearson brought her the note.

"Mr. Temple Barholm received a telegram from London last night, ma'am," he explained, "and he was obliged to take the midnight train. He hadn't time to do any more than leave a few lines for you, but he asked me to tell you that nothing disturbing had occurred. He specially mentioned that everything was all right."

"But how very sudden!" exclaimed Miss Alicia, opening her note and beginning to read it. Plainly it had been written hurriedly indeed. It read as though he had been in such haste that he hadn't had time to be clear.

Dear little Miss Alicia:

I've got to light out of here as quick as I can make it. I can't even stop to tell you why. There's just one thing-- don't get rattled, Miss Alicia. Whatever any one says or does, just don't let yourself get rattled.

Yours affectionately,

T. TEMBAROM.

"Pearson," Miss Alicia exclaimed, again looking up, "are you sure everything is all right?"

"That was what he said, ma'am. `All right,' ma'am."

"Thank you, Pearson. I am glad to hear it."

She walked to and fro in the sunshine, reading the note and rereading it.

"Of course if he said it was all right, it was all right," she murmured. "It is only the phrasing that makes me slightly nervous. Why should he ask me not to get rattled?" The term was by this time as familiar to her as any in Dr. Johnson's dictionary. "Of course he knows I do get rattled much too easily; but why should I be in danger of getting rattled now if nothing has happened?" She gave a very small start as she remembered something. "Could it be that Captain Palliser-- But how could he? Though I do not like Captain Palliser."

Captain Palliser, her distaste for whom at the moment quite agitated her, was this morning an early riser also, and as she turned in her walk she found him coming toward her.

"I find I am obliged to take an early train to London this morning," he said, after their exchange of greetings. "It is quite unexpected. I spoke to Mr. Temple Barholm about it last night."

Perhaps the unexpectedness, perhaps a certain suggestion of coincidence, caused Miss Alicia's side ringlets to appear momentarily tremulous.

"Then perhaps we had better go in to breakfast at once," she said.

"Is Mr. Temple Barholm down?" he inquired as they seated themselves at the breakfast-table.

"He is not here," she answered. "He, too, was called away unexpectedly. He went to London by the midnight train."

She had never been so aware of her unchristian lack of liking for Captain Palliser as she was when he paused a moment before he made any comment. His pause was as marked as a start, and the smile he indulged in was, she felt, most singularly disagreeable. It was a smile of the order which conceals an unpleasant explanation of itself.

"Oh," he remarked, "he has gone first, has he?"

"Yes," she answered, pouring out his coffee for him. "He evidently had business of importance."

They were quite alone, and she was not one of the women one need disturb oneself about. She had been browbeaten into hypersensitive timidity early in life, and did not know how to resent cleverly managed polite bullying. She would always feel herself at fault if she was tempted to criticize any one. She was innocent and nervous enough to betray herself to any extent, because she would feel it rude to refuse to answer questions, howsoever far they exceeded the limits of polite curiosity. He had learned a good deal from her in the past. Why not try what could be startled out of her now? Thus Captain Palliser said:

"I dare say you feel a little anxious at such an extraordinarily

sudden departure," he suggested amiably. "Bolting off in the middle of the night was sudden, if he did not explain himself."

"He had no time to explain," she answered.

"That makes it appear all the more sudden. But no doubt he left you a message. I saw you were reading a note when I joined you on the terrace."

Lightly casual as he chose to make the words sound, they were an audacity he would have known better than to allow himself with any one but a timid early-Victorian spinster whose politeness was hypersensitive in its quality.

"He particularly desired that I should not be anxious," she said. "He is always considerate."

"He would, of course, have explained everything if he had not been so hurried?"

"Of course, if it had been necessary," answered Miss Alicia, nervously sipping her tea.

"Naturally," said Captain Palliser. "His note no doubt mentioned that he went away on business connected with his friend Mr. Strangeways?"

There was no question of the fact that she was startled.

"He had not time enough," she said. "He could only write a few lines. Mr. Strangeways?"

"We had a long talk about him last night. He told me a remarkable story," Captain Palliser went on. "I suppose you are quite familiar with all the details of it?"

"I know how he found him in New York, and I know how generous he has been to him."

"Have you been told nothing more?"

"There was nothing more to tell. If there was anything, I am sure he had some good reason for not telling me," said Miss Alicia, loyally. "His reasons are always good."

Palliser's air of losing a shade or so of discretion as a result of astonishment was really well done.

"Do you mean to say that he has not even hinted that ever since he arrived at Temple Barholm he has strongly suspected Strangeways' identity--that he has even known who he is?" he exclaimed.

Miss Alicia's small hands clung to the table-cloth.

"He has not known at all. He has been most anxious to discover. He has used every endeavor," she brought out with some difficulty.

"You say he has been trying to find out?" Palliser interposed.

"He has been more than anxious," she protested. "He has been to London again and again; he has gone to great expense; he has even seen people from Scotland Yard. I have sometimes almost thought he was assuming more responsibility than was just to himself. In the case of a relative or an old friend, but for an entire stranger--Oh, really, I ought not to seem to criticize. I do not presume to criticize his wonderful generosity and determination and goodness. No one should presume to question him."

"If he knows that you feel like this--" Palliser began.

"He knows all that I feel," Miss Alicia took him up with a pretty, rising spirit. "He knows that I am full of unspeakable gratitude to him for his beautiful kindness to me; he knows that I admire and respect and love him in a way I could never express, and that I would do anything in the world he could wish me to do."

"Naturally," said Captain Palliser. "I was only about to express my surprise that since he is aware of all this he has not told you who he has proved Strangeways to be. It is a little odd, you know."

"I think "--Miss Alicia was even gently firm in her reply --"that you are a little mistaken in believing Mr. Temple Barholm has proved Mr. Strangeways to be anybody. When he has proof, he will no doubt think proper to tell me about it. Until then I should prefer--"

Palliser laughed as he finished her sentence.

"Not to know. I was not going to betray him, Miss Alicia. He evidently has one of his excellent reasons for keeping things to himself. I may mention, however, that it is not so much he who has proof as I myself."

"You!" How could she help quite starting in her seat when his gray eyes fixed themselves on her with such a touch of finely amused malice?

"I offered him the proof last night, and it rather upset him," he said. "He thought no one knew but himself, and he was not inclined to tell the world. He was upset because I said I had seen the man and could swear to his identity. That was why he went away so hurriedly. He no doubt went to see Strangeways and talk it over."

"See Mr. Strangeways? But Mr. Strangeways--" Miss Alicia rose and rang the bell.

"Tell Pearson I wish to see him at once," she said to the footman.

Palliser took in her mood without comment. He had no objection to being present when she made inquiries of Pearson.

"I hear the wheels of the dog-cart," he remarked. "You see, I must catch my train."

Pearson stood at the door.

"Is not Mr. Strangeways in his room, Pearson?" Miss Alicia asked.

"Mr. Temple Barholm took him to London when he last went, ma'am," answered Pearson. "You remember he went at night. The doctor thought it best."

"He did not tell you that, either?" said Palliser, casually.

"The dog-cart is at the door, sir," announced Pearson.

Miss Alicia's hand was unsteady when the departing guest took it.

"Don't be disturbed," he said considerately, "but a most singular thing has happened. When I asked so many questions about Temple Barholm's Man with the Iron Mask I asked them for curious reasons. That must be my apology. You will hear all about it later, probably

from Palford & Grimby."

When he had left the room Miss Alicia stood upon the hearth- rug as the dog-cart drove away, and she was pale. Her simple and easily disturbed brain was in a whirl. She could scarcely remember what she had heard, and could not in the least comprehend what it had seemed intended to imply, except that there had been concealed in the suggestions some disparagement of her best beloved.

Singular as it was that Pearson should return without being summoned, when she turned and found that he mysteriously stood inside the threshold again, as if she had called him, she felt a great sense of relief.

"Pearson," she faltered, "I am rather upset by certain things which Captain Palliser has said. I am afraid I do not understand."

She looked at him helplessly, not knowing what more to say. She wished extremely that she could think of something definite.

The masterly finish of Pearson's reply lay in its neatly restrained hint of unobtrusively perceptive sympathy.

"Yes, Miss. I was afraid so. Which is why I took the liberty of stepping into the room again. I myself do not understand, but of course I do not expect to. If I may be so bold as to say it, Miss,

whatever we don't understand, we both understand Mr. Temple Barholm. My instructions were to remind you, Miss, that everything would be all right."

Miss Alicia took up her letter from the table where she had laid it down.

"Thank you, Pearson," she said, her forehead beginning to clear itself a little. "Of course, of course. I ought not to-- He told me not to-- get rattled," she added with plaintive ingenuousness, "and I ought not to, above all things."

"Yes, Miss. It is most important that you should not."

CHAPTER XXXV

The story of the adventures, experiences, and journeyings of Mr. Joseph Hutchinson, his daughter, and the invention, if related in detail, would prove reading of interest; but as this is merely a study of the manner in which the untrained characteristics and varied limitations of one man adjusted or failed to adjust themselves to incongruous surroundings and totally unprepared-for circumstances,