

CHAPTER XXXVII

Old Mrs. Hutchinson's letter had supplied much detail, but when her son and grand-daughter arrived in the village of Temple Barholm they heard much more, the greater part of it not in the least to be relied upon.

"The most of it's lies, as folks enjoys theirsels pretendin' to believe," the grand-mother commented. "It's servants'-hall talk and cottage gossip, and plenty made itself up out o' beer drunk in th' tap-room at th' Wool Park. In a place where naught much happens, people get into th' way 'o springin' on a bit o' news, and shakin' and worryin' it like a terrier does a rat. It's nature. That lad's given 'em lots to talk about ever since he coom. He's been a blessin' to 'em. If he'd been gentry, he'd not ha' been nigh as lively. Th' village lads tries to talk through their noses like him. Little Tummas Hibblethwaite does it i' broad Lancashire."

The only facts fairly authenticated were that the mysterious stranger had been taken away very late one night, some time before the interview between Mr. Temple Barholm and Captain Palliser, of which Burrill knew so much because he had "happened to be about." When a domestic magnate of Burrill's type "happens to be about" at a crisis, he is not unlikely to hear a great deal. Burrill, it was believed, knew much more than he deigned to make public. The entire truth was

that Captain Palliser himself, in one of his hasty appearances in the neighborhood of Temple Barholm, had bestowed a few words of cold caution on him.

"Don't talk too much," he had said. "Proof is required before talk is safe. The American was sharp enough to say that to me himself. He was sharp enough, too, to keep his man hidden. I was the only person that saw him who could have recognized him, and I saw him by chance. Palford & Grimby require proof. We are in search of it. Servants will talk; but if you don't want to run the risk of getting yourself into trouble, don't make absolute statements."

This had been a disappointment to Burrill, who had seen himself developing in magnitude; but he was a timid man, and therefore felt it wise to convey his knowledge merely through the conviction carried by a dignified silence after his first indiscreet revelation of having "happened to be about" had been made. It would have been some solace to him to intimate to Miss Alicia by his bearing and the manner of his services that she had been discovered, so to speak, in the character of a sort of accomplice; that her position was a perilously uncertain one, which would probably end in utter downfall, leaving her in her old and proper place as an elderly, insignificant, and unattractive poor relation, without a feature to recommend her. But being, as before remarked, a timid man, and recalling the interview between himself and his employer held outside the dining-room door, and having also a disturbing memory of the sharp, cool, boyish eye and the tone

of the casual remark that he had "a head on his shoulders" and that it was "up to him to make the others understand," it seemed as well to restrain his inclinations until the proof Palford & Grimby required was forthcoming.

It was perhaps the moderate and precautionary attitude of Palford & Grimby, during their first somewhat startled though reserved interview with Captain Palliser, which had prevented the vaguely wild rumors from being regarded as more than villagers' exaggerated talk among themselves. The "gentry," indeed, knew much less of the cottagers than the cottagers knew of the gentry; consequently events furnishing much excitement among the village people not infrequently remained unheard-of by those in the class above them. A story less incredible might have been more considered; but the highly colored reasons given for the absence of the owner of Temple Barholm would, if heard of, have been more than likely to be received and passed over with a smile.

The manner of Mr. Palford and also of Mr. Grimby during the deliberately unmelodramatic and carefully connected relation of Captain Palliser's singular story, was that of professional gentlemen who for reasons of good breeding were engaged in restraining outward expression of conviction that they were listening to utter nonsense. Palliser himself was aware of this, and upon the whole did not wonder at it in entirely unimaginative persons of extremely sober lives. In fact, he had begun by giving them some warning as to what they might expect in the way of unusualness.

"You will, no doubt, think what I am about to tell you absurd and incredible," he had prefaced his statements. "I thought the same myself when my first suspicions were aroused. I was, in fact, inclined to laugh at my own idea until one link connected itself with another."

Neither Mr. Grimby nor Mr. Palford was inclined to laugh. On the contrary, they were extremely grave, and continued to find it necessary to restrain their united tendency to indicate facially that the thing must be nonsense. It transcended all bounds, as it were. The delicacy with which they managed to convey this did them much credit. This delicacy was equaled by the moderation with which Captain Palliser drew their attention to the fact that it was not the thing likely-to-happen on which were founded the celebrated criminal cases of legal history; it was the incredible and almost impossible events, the ordinarily unbelievable duplicities, moral obliquities and coincidences, which made them what they were and attracted the attention of the world. This, Mr. Palford and his partner were obviously obliged to admit. What they did not admit was that such things never having occurred in one's own world, they had been mentally relegated to the world of newspaper and criminal record as things that could not happen to oneself. Mr. Palford cleared his throat in a seriously cautionary way.

"This is, of course, a matter suggesting too serious an accusation not to be approached in the most conservative manner," he remarked.

"Most serious consequences have resulted in cases implying libelous assertions which have been made rashly," added Mr. Grimby. "As Mr. Temple Barholm intimated to you, a man of almost unlimited means has command of resources which it might not be easy to contend with if he had reason to feel himself injured."

The fact that Captain Palliser had in a bitterly frustrated moment allowed himself to be goaded into losing his temper, and "giving away" to Tembarom the discovery on which he had felt that he could rely as a lever, did not argue that a like weakness would lead him into more dangerous indiscretion. He had always regarded himself as a careful man whose defenses were well built about him at such crises in his career as rendered entrenchment necessary. There would, of course, be some pleasure in following the matter up and getting more than even with a man who had been insolent to him; but a more practical feature of the case was that if, through his alert observation and shrewd aid, Jem Temple Barholm was restored to his much-to-be-envied place in the world, a far from unnatural result would be that he might feel suitable gratitude and indebtedness to the man who, not from actual personal liking but from a mere sense of justice, had rescued him. As for the fears of Messrs. Palford & Grimby, he had put himself on record with Burrill by commanding him to hold his tongue and stating clearly that proof was both necessary and lacking. No man could be regarded as taking risks whose attitude was so wholly conservative and non-accusing. Servants will gossip. A superior who reproves such

gossip holds an unattackable position. In the private room of Palford & Grimby, however, he could confidently express his opinions without risk.

"The recognition of a man lost sight of for years, and seen only for a moment through a window, is not substantial evidence," Mr. Grimby had proceeded. "The incident was startling, but not greatly to be relied upon."

"I knew him." Palliser was slightly grim in his air of finality. "He was a man most men either liked or hated. I didn't like him. I detested a trick he had of staring at you under his drooping lids. By the way, do you remember the portrait of Miles Hugo which was so like him?"

Mr. Palford remembered having heard that there was a certain portrait in the gallery which Mr. James Temple Barholm had been said to resemble. He had no distinct recollection of the ancestor it represented.

"It was a certain youngster who was a page in the court of Charles the Second and who died young. Miles Hugo Charles James was his name. He is my strongest clue. The American seemed rather keen the first time we talked together. He was equally keen about Jem Temple Barholm. He wanted to know what he looked like, and whether it was true that he was like the portrait."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Palford and Grimby, simultaneously.

"It struck me that there was something more than mere curiosity in his manner," Palliser enlarged. "I couldn't make him out then. Later, I began to see that he was remarkably anxious to keep every one from Strangeways. It was a sort of Man in the Iron Mask affair. Strangeways was apparently not only too excitable to be looked at or spoken to, but too excitable to be spoken of. He wouldn't talk about him."

"That is exceedingly curious," remarked Mr. Palford, but it was not in response to Palliser. A few moments before he had suddenly looked thoughtful. He wore now the aspect of a man trying to recall something as Palliser continued.

"One day, after I had been to look at a sunset through a particular window in the wing where Strangeways was kept, I passed the door of his sitting-room, and heard the American arguing with him. He was evidently telling him he was to be taken elsewhere, and the poor devil was terrified. I heard him beg him for God's sake not to send him away. There was panic in his voice. In connection with the fact that he has got him away secretly--at midnight--it's an ugly thing to recall."

"It would seem to have significance." Grimby said it uneasily.

"It set me thinking and looking into things," Palliser went on.

"Pearson was secretive, but the head man, Burrill, made casual enlightening remarks. I gathered some curious details, which might or might not have meant a good deal. When Strangeways suddenly appeared at his window one evening a number of things fitted themselves together. My theory is that the American--Tembarom, as he used to call himself --may not have been certain of the identity at first, but he wouldn't have brought Strangeways with him if he had not had some reason to suspect who he was. He daren't lose sight of him, and he wanted time to make sure and to lay his plans. The portrait of Miles Hugo was a clue which alarmed him, and no doubt he has been following it. If he found it led to nothing, he could easily turn Strangeways over to the public charge and let him be put into a lunatic asylum. If he found it led to a revelation which would make him a pauper again, it would be easy to dispose of him."

"Come! Come! Captain Palliser! We mustn't go too far!" ejaculated Mr. Grimby, alarmedly. It shocked him to think of the firm being dragged into a case dealing with capital crime and possible hangmen! That was not its line of the profession.

Captain Palliser's slight laugh contained no hint of being shocked by any possibilities whatever.

"There are extremely private asylums and so-called sanatoriums where the discipline is strict, and no questions are asked. One sometimes

reads in the papers of cases in which mild-mannered keepers in defending themselves against the attacks of violent patients are obliged to use force--with disastrous results. It is in such places that our investigations should begin."

"Dear me! Dear me!" Mr. Grimby broke out. "Isn't that going rather far? You surely don't think--"

"Mr. Tembarom's chief characteristic was that he was a practical and direct person. He would do what he had to do in exactly that businesslike manner. The inquiries I have been making have been as to the whereabouts of places in which a superfluous relative might be placed without attracting attention."

"That is really astute, but--but--what do you think, Palford?" Mr. Grimby turned to his partner, still wearing the shocked and disturbed expression.

"I have been recalling to mind a circumstance which probably bears upon the case," said Mr. Palford. "Captain Palliser's mention of the portrait reminded me of it. I remember now that on Mr. Temple Barholm's first visit to the picture-gallery he seemed much attracted by the portrait of Miles Hugo. He stopped and examined it curiously. He said he felt as if he had seen it before. He turned to it once or twice; and finally remarked that he might have seen some one like it at a great fancy-dress ball which had taken place in New York."

"Had he been invited to the ball?" laughed Palliser.

"I did not gather that," replied Mr. Palford gravely. "He had apparently watched the arriving guests from some railings near by--or perhaps it was a lamp-post--with other news-boys."

"He recognized the likeness to Strangeways, no doubt, and it gave him what he calls a 'jolt,'" said Captain Palliser. "He must have experienced a number of jolts during the last few months."

Palford & Grimby's view of the matter continued to be marked by extreme distaste for the whole situation and its disturbing and irritating possibilities. The coming of the American heir to the estate of Temple Barholm had been trying to the verge of extreme painfulness; but, sufficient time having lapsed and their client having troubled them but little, they had outlived the shock of his first appearance and settled once more into the calm of their accustomed atmosphere and routine. That he should suddenly reappear upon their dignified horizon as a probable melodramatic criminal was a fault of taste and a lack of consideration beyond expression. To be dragged-into vulgar detective work, to be referred to in news-papers in a connection which would lead to confusing the firm with the representatives of such branches of the profession as dealt with persons who had committed acts for which in vulgar parlance they might possibly "swing," if their legal defenders did not "get them off," to

a firm whose sole affairs had been the dealing with noble and ancient estates, with advising and supporting personages of stately name, and with private and weighty family confidences. If the worst came to the worst, the affair would surely end in the most glaring and odious notoriety: in head-lines and daily reports even in London, in appalling pictures of every one concerned in every New York newspaper, even in baffled struggles to keep abominable woodcuts of themselves-- Mr. Edward James Palford and Mr. James Matthew Grimby--from being published in sensational journalistic sheets! Professional duty demanded that the situation should be dealt with, that investigation should be entered into, that the most serious even if conservative steps should be taken at once. With regard to the accepted report of Mr. James Temple Barholm's tragic death, it could not be denied that Captain Palliser's view of the naturalness of the origin of the mistake that had been made had a logical air.

"In a region full of rioting derelicts crazed with the lawless excitement of their dash after gold," he had said, "identities and names are easily lost. Temple Barholm himself was a derelict and in a desperate state. He was in no mood to speak of himself or try to make friends. He no doubt came and went to such work as he did scarcely speaking to any one. A mass of earth and debris of all sorts suddenly gives way, burying half-a-dozen men. Two or three are dug out dead, the others not reached. There was no time to spare to dig for dead men. Some one had seen Temple Barholm near the place; he was seen no more. Ergo, he was buried with the rest. At that time, those who knew

him in England felt it was the best thing that could have happened to him. It would have been if his valet had not confessed his trick, and old Temple Barholm had not died. My theory is that he may have left the place days before the accident without being missed. His mental torment caused some mental illness, it does not matter what. He lost his memory and wandered about--the Lord knows how or where he lived; he probably never knew himself. The American picked him up and found that he had money. For reasons of his own, he professed to take care of him. He must have come on some clue just when he heard of his new fortune. He was naturally panic-stricken; it must have been a big blow at that particular moment. He was sharp enough to see what it might mean, and held on to the poor chap like grim death, and has been holding on ever since."

"We must begin to take steps," decided Palford & Grimby. "We must of course take steps at once, but we must begin with discretion."

After grave private discussion, they began to take the steps in question and with the caution that it seemed necessary to observe until they felt solid ground under their feet. Captain Palliser was willing to assist them. He had been going into the matter himself. He went down to the neighborhood of Temple Barholm and quietly looked up data which might prove illuminating when regarded from one point or another. It was on the first of these occasions that he saw and warned Burrill. It was from Burrill he heard of Tummas Hibblethwaite.

"There's an impident little vagabond in the village, sir," he said, "that Mr. Temple Barholm used to go and see and take New York newspapers to. A cripple the lad is, and he's got a kind of craze for talking about Mr. James Temple Barholm. He had a map of the place where he was said to be killed. If I may presume to mention it, sir," he added with great dignity, "it is my opinion that the two had a good deal of talk together on the subject."

"I dare say," Captain Palliser admitted indifferently, and made no further inquiry or remark.

He sauntered into the Hibblethwaite cottage, however, late the next afternoon.

Tummas was in a bad temper, for reasons quite sufficient for himself, and he regarded him sourly.

"What has tha coom for?" he demanded. "I did na ask thee."

"Don't be cheeky!" said Captain Palliser. "I will give you a sovereign if you'll let me see the map you and Mr. Temple Barholm used to look at and talk so much about."

He laid the sovereign down on the small table by Tummas's sofa, but Tummas did not pick it up.

"I know who tha art. Tha'rt Palliser, an' tha wast th' one as said as him as was killed in th' Klondike had coom back alive."

"You've been listening to that servants' story, have you?" remarked Palliser. "You had better be careful as to what you say. I suppose you never heard of libel suits. Where would you find yourself if you were called upon to pay Mr. Temple Barholm ten thousand pounds' damages? You'd be obliged to sell your atlas."

"Burrill towd as he heard thee say tha'd swear in court as it was th' one as was killed as tha'd seen."

"That's Burrill's story, not mine. And Burrill had better keep his mouth shut," said Palliser. "If it were true, how would you like it? I've heard you were interested in 'th' one as was killed."

Tummas's eyes burned troublously.

"I've got reet down taken wi' th' other un," he answered. "He's noan gentry, but he's th' reet mak'. I--I dunnot believe as him as was killed has coom back."

"Neither do I," Palliser answered, with amiable tolerance. "The American gentleman had better come back himself and disprove it. When you used to talk about the Klondike, he never said anything to make you feel as if he doubted that the other man was dead?"

"Not him," answered Tummas.

"Eh! Tummas, what art tha talkin' about?" exclaimed Mrs.

Hibblethwaite, who was mending at the other end of the room. "I heerd him say mysel, `Suppose th' story hadn't been true an' he was alive somewhere now, it'd make a big change, would na' it?' An' he laughed."

"I never heerd him," said Tummas, in stout denial.

"Tha's losin' tha moind," commented his mother. "As soon as I heerd th' talk about him runnin' away an' takin' th' mad gentleman wi' him I remembered it. An' I remembered as he sat still after it and said nowt for a minute or so, same as if he was thinkin' things over. Theer was summat a bit queer about it."

"I never heerd him," Tummas asserted, obstinately, and shut his mouth.

"He were as ready to talk about th' poor gentleman as met with th' accident as tha wert thysel', Tummas," Mrs. Hibblethwaite proceeded, moved by the opportunity offered for presenting her views on the exciting topic. "He'd ax thee aw sorts o' questions about what tha'd found out wi' pumpin' foak. He'd ax me questions now an' agen about what he was loike to look at, an' how tall he wur. Onct he axed me if I remembered what soart o' chin he had an' how he spoke."

"It wur to set thee goin' an' please me," volunteered Tummas, grudgingly. "He did it same as he'd look at th' map to please me an' tell me tales about th' news-lads i' New York."

It had not seemed improbable that a village cripple tied to a sofa would be ready enough to relate all he knew, and perhaps so much more that it would be necessary to use discretion in selecting statements of value. To drop in and give him a sovereign and let him talk had appeared simple. Lads of his class liked to be listened to, enjoyed enlarging upon and rendering dramatic such material as had fallen into their hands. But Tummas was an eccentric, and instinct led him to close like an oyster before a remote sense of subtly approaching attack. It was his mother, not he, who had provided information; but it was not sufficiently specialized to be worth much.

"What did tha say he'd run away fur?" Tummas said to his parent later.

"He's not one o' th' runnin' away soart."

"He has probably been called away by business," remarked Captain Palliser, as he rose to go after a few minutes' casual talk with Mrs. Hibblethwaite. "It was a mistake not to leave an address behind him. Your mother is mistaken in saying that he took the mad gentleman with him. He had him removed late at night some time before he went himself."

"Tak tha sov'rin'," said Tummas, as Palliser moved away. "I did na

show thee th' atlas. Tha did na want to see it."

"I will leave the sovereign for your mother," said Palliser. "I'm sorry you are not in a better humor."

His interest in the atlas had indeed been limited to his idea that it would lead to subjects of talk which might cast illuminating side-lights and possibly open up avenues and vistas. Tummas, however, having instinctively found him displeasing, he had gained but little.

Avenues and vistas were necessary --avenues through which the steps of Palford and Grimby might wander, vistas which they might explore with hesitating, investigating glances. So far, the scene remained unpromisingly blank. The American Temple Barholm had simply disappeared, as had his mysterious charge. Steps likely to lead to definite results can scarcely be taken hopefully in the case of a person who has seemed temporarily to cease to exist. You cannot interrogate him, you cannot demand information, whatsoever the foundations upon which rest your accusations, if such accusation can be launched only into thin air and the fact that there is nobody to reply to --to acknowledge or indignantly refute them--is in itself a serious barrier to accomplishment. It was also true that only a few weeks had elapsed since the accused had, so to speak, dematerialized. It was also impossible to calculate upon what an American of his class and peculiarities would be likely to do in any circumstances whatever.

In private conference, Palford and Grimby frankly admitted to each other that they would almost have preferred that Captain Palliser should have kept his remarkable suspicions to himself, for the time being at least. Yet when they had admitted this they were confronted by the disturbing possibility--suggested by Palliser--that actual crime had been or might be committed. They had heard unpleasant stories of private lunatic asylums and their like. Things to shudder at might be going on at the very moment they spoke to each other. Under this possibility, no supineness would be excusable. Efforts to trace the missing man must at least be made. Efforts were made, but with no result. Painful as it was to reflect on the subject of the asylums, careful private inquiry was made, information was quietly collected, there were even visits to gruesomely quiet places on various polite pretexts.

"If a longer period of time had elapsed," Mr. Palford remarked several times, with some stiffness of manner, "we should feel that we had more solid foundation for our premises."

"Perfectly right," Captain Palliser agreed with him, "but it is lapse of time which may mean life or death to Jem Temple Barholm; so it's perhaps as well to be on the safe side and go on quietly following small clues. I dare say you would feel more comfortable yourselves."

Both Mr. Palford and Mr. Grimby, having made an appointment with Miss Alicia, arrived one afternoon at Temple Barholm to talk to her

privately, thereby casting her into a state of agonized anxiety which reduced her to pallor.

"Our visit is merely one of inquiry, Miss Temple Barholm," Mr. Palford began. "There is perhaps nothing alarming in our client's absence."

"In the note which he left me he asked me to--feel no anxiety," Miss Alicia said.

"He left you a note of explanation? I wish we had known this earlier!" Mr. Palford's tone had the note of relieved exclamation. Perhaps there was an entirely simple solution of the painful difficulty.

But his hope had been too sanguine.

"It was not a note of explanation, exactly. He went away too suddenly to have time to explain."

The two men looked at each other disturbedly.

"He had not mentioned to you his intention of going?" asked Mr. Grimby.

"I feel sure he did not know he was going when he said good-night. He remained with Captain Palliser talking for some time." Miss Alicia's eyes held wavering and anxious question as she looked from one to the

other. She wondered how much more than herself her visitors knew. "He found a telegram when he went to his room. It contained most disquieting news about Mr. Strangeways. He--he had got away from the place where--"

"Got away!" Mr. Palford was again exclamatory. "Was he in some institution where he was kept under restraint?"

Miss Alicia was wholly unable to explain to herself why some quality in his manner filled her with sudden distress.

"Oh, I think not! Surely not! Surely nothing of that sort was necessary. He was very quiet always, and he was getting better every day. But it was important that he should be watched over. He was no doubt under the care of a physician in some quiet sanatorium."

"Some quiet sanatorium!" Mr. Palford's disturbance of mind was manifest. "But you did not know where?"

"No. Indeed, Mr. Temple Barholm talked very little of Mr. Strangeways. I believe he knew that it distressed me to feel that I could be of no real assistance as--as the case was so peculiar."

Each perturbed solicitor looked again with rapid question at the other. Miss Alicia saw the exchange of glances and, so to speak, broke down under the pressure of their unconcealed anxiety. The last few

weeks with their suggestion of accusation too vague to be met had been too much for her.

"I am afraid--I feel sure you know something I do not," she began. "I am most anxious and unhappy. I have not liked to ask questions, because that would have seemed to imply a doubt of Mr. Temple Barholm. I have even remained at home because I did not wish to hear things I could not understand. I do not know what has been said. Pearson, in whom I have the greatest confidence, felt that Mr. Temple Barholm would prefer that I should wait until he returned."

"Do you think he will return?" said Mr. Grimby, amazedly.

"Oh!" the gentle creature ejaculated. "Can you possibly think he will not? Why? Why?"

Mr. Palford had shared his partner's amazement. It was obvious that she was as ignorant as a babe of the details of Palliser's extraordinary story. In her affectionate consideration for Temple Barholm she had actually shut herself up lest she should hear anything said against him which she could not refute. She stood innocently obedient to his wishes, like the boy upon the burning deck, awaiting his return and his version of whatsoever he had been accused of. There was something delicately heroic in the little, slender old thing, with her troubled eyes and her cap and her quivering sideringlets.

"You," she appealed, "are his legal advisers, and will be able to tell me if there is anything he would wish me to know. I could not allow myself to listen to villagers or servants; but I may ask you."

"We are far from knowing as much as we desire to know," Mr. Palford replied.

"We came here, in fact," added Grimby, "to ask questions of you, Miss Temple Barholm."

"The fact that Miss Temple Barholm has not allowed herself to be prejudiced by village gossip, which is invariably largely unreliable, will make her an excellent witness," Mr. Palford said to his partner, with a deliberation which held suggestive significance. Each man, in fact, had suddenly realized that her ignorance would leave her absolutely unbiased in her answers to any questions they might put, and that it was much better in cross-examining an emotional elderly lady that such should be the case.

"Witness!" Miss Alicia found the word alarming. Mr. Palford's bow was apologetically palliative.

"A mere figure of speech, madam," he said.

"I really know so little every one else doesn't know." Miss Alicia's protest had a touch of bewilderment in it. What could they wish to ask

her?

"But, as we understand it, your relations with Mr. Temple Barholm were most affectionate and confidential."

"We were very fond of each other," she answered.

"For that reason he no doubt talked to you more freely than to other people," Mr. Grimby put it. "Perhaps, Palford, it would be as well to explain to Miss Temple Barholm that a curious feature of this matter is that it--in a way--involves certain points concerning the late Mr. Temple Barholm."

Miss Alicia uttered a pathetic exclamation.

"Poor Jem--who died so cruelly!"

Mr. Palford bent his head in acquiescence.

"Perhaps you can tell me what the present Mr. Temple Barholm knew of him--how much he knew?"

"I told him the whole story the first time we took tea together," Miss Alicia replied; and, between her recollection of that strangely happy afternoon and her wonder at its connection with the present moment, she began to feel timid and uncertain.

"How did it seem to impress him?"

She remembered it all so well--his queer, dear New York way of expressing his warm-hearted indignation at the cruelty of what had happened.

"Oh, he was very much excited. He was so sorry for him. He wanted to know everything about him. He asked me what he looked like."

"Oh!" said Palford. "He wanted to know that?"

"He was so full of sympathy," she replied, her explanation gaining warmth. "When I told him that the picture of Miles Hugo in the gallery was said to look like Jem as a boy, he wanted very much to see it. Afterward we went and saw it together. I shall always remember how he stood and looked at it. Most young men would not have cared. But he always had such a touching interest in poor Jem."

"You mean that he asked questions about him--about his death, and so forth?" was Mr. Palford's inquiry.

"About all that concerned him. He was interested especially in his looks and manner of speaking and personality, so to speak. And in the awful accident which ended his life, though he would not let me talk about that after he had asked his first questions."

"What kind of questions?" suggested Grimby.

"Only about what was known of the time and place, and how the sad story reached England. It used to touch me to think that the only person who seemed to care was the one who --might have been expected to be almost glad the tragic thing had happened. But he was not."

Mr. Palford watched Mr. Grimby, and Mr. Grimby gave more than one dubious and distressed glance at Palford.

"His interest was evident," remarked Palford, thoughtfully. "And unusual under the circumstances."

For a moment he hesitated, then put another question: "Did he ever seem--I should say, do you remember any occasion when he appeared to think that--there might be any reason to doubt that Mr. James Temple Barholm was one of the men who died in the Klondike?"

He felt that through this wild questioning they had at least reached a certain testimony supporting Captain Palliser's views; and his interest reluctantly increased. It was reluctant because there could be no shadow of a question that this innocent spinster lady told the absolute truth; and, this being the case, one seemed to be dragged to the verge of depths which must inevitably be explored. Miss Alicia's expression was that of one who conscientiously searched memory.

"I do not remember that he really expressed doubt," she answered, carefully. "Not exactly that, but--"

"But what?" prompted Palford as she hesitated. "Please try to recall exactly what he said. It is most important."

The fact that his manner was almost eager, and that eagerness was not his habit, made her catch her breath and look more questioning and puzzled than before.

"One day he came to my sitting-room when he seemed rather excited," she explained. "He had been with Mr. Strangeways, who had been worse than usual. Perhaps he wanted to distract himself and forget about it. He asked me questions and talked about poor Jem for about an hour. And at last he said, 'Do you suppose there's any sort of chance that it mightn't be true--that story that came from the Klondike?' He said it so thoughtfully that I was startled and said, 'Do you think there could be such a chance--do you?' And he drew a long breath and answered, 'You want to be sure about things like that; you've got to be sure.' I was a little excited, so he changed the subject very soon afterward, and I never felt quite certain of what he was really thinking. You see what he said was not so much an expression of doubt as a sort of question."

A touch of the lofty condemnatory made Mr. Palford impressive.

"I am compelled to admit that I fear that it was a question of which he had already guessed the answer," he said.

At this point Miss Alicia clasped her hands quite tightly together upon her knees.

"If you please," she exclaimed, "I must ask you to make things a little clear to me. What dreadful thing has happened? I will regard any communication as a most sacred confidence."

"I think we may as well, Palford?" Mr. Grimby suggested to his partner.

"Yes," Palford acquiesced. He felt the difficulty of a blank explanation. "We are involved in a most trying position," he said. "We feel that great discretion must be used until we have reached more definite certainty. An extraordinary--in fact, a startling thing has occurred. We are beginning, as a result of cumulative evidence, to feel that there was reason to believe that the Klondike story was to be doubted--"

"That poor Jem--!" cried Miss Alicia.

"One begins to be gravely uncertain as to whether he has not been in this house for months, whether he was not the mysterious Mr.

Strangeways!"

"Jem! Jem!" gasped poor little Miss Temple Barholm, quite white with shock.

"And if he was the mysterious Strangeways," Mr. Grimby assisted to shorten the matter, "the American Temple Barholm apparently knew the fact, brought him here for that reason, and for the same reason kept him secreted and under restraint."

"No! No!" cried Miss Alicia. "Never! Never! I beg you not to say such a thing. Excuse me--I cannot listen! It would be wrong--ungrateful. Excuse me!" She got up from her seat, trembling with actual anger in her sense of outrage. It was a remarkable thing to see the small, elderly creature angry, but this remarkable thing had happened. It was as though she were a mother defending her young.

"I loved poor Jem and I love Temple, and, though I am only a woman who never has been the least clever, I know them both. I know neither of them could lie or do a wicked, cunning thing. Temple is the soul of honor."

It was quite an inspirational outburst. She had never before in her life said so much at one time. Of course tears began to stream down her face, while Mr. Palford and Mr. Grimby gazed at her in great embarrassment.

"If Mr. Strangeways was poor Jem come back alive, Temple did not know--he never knew. All he did for him was done for kindness' sake. I--I--

" It was inevitable that she should stammer before going to this length of violence, and that the words should burst from her: "I would swear it!"

It was really a shock to both Palford and Grimby. That a lady of Miss Temple Barholm's age and training should volunteer to swear to a thing was almost alarming. It was also in rather unpleasing taste.

"Captain Palliser obliged Mr. Temple Temple Barholm to confess that he had known for some time," Mr. Palford said with cold regret. "He also informed him that he should communicate with us without delay."

"Captain Palliser is a bad man." Miss Alicia choked back a gasp to make the protest.

"It was after their interview that Mr. Temple Barholm almost immediately left the house."

"Without any explanation whatever," added Grimby.

"He left a few lines for me," defended Miss Alicia.

"We have not seen them." Mr. Palford was still as well as cold. Poor

little Miss Alicia took them out of her pocket with an unsteady hand. They were always with her, and she could not on such a challenge seem afraid to allow them to be read. Mr. Palford took them from her with a slight bow of thanks. He adjusted his glasses and read aloud, with pauses between phrases which seemed somewhat to puzzle him.

"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, don't get rattled.

"Yours affectionately,

"T. TEMBAROM."

There was a silence, Mr. Palford passed the paper to his partner, who gave it careful study. Afterward he refolded it and handed it back to Miss Alicia.

"In a court of law," was Mr. Palford's sole remark, "it would not be regarded as evidence for the defendant."

Miss Alicia's tears were still streaming, but she held her ringleted head well up.

"I cannot stay! I beg your pardon, I do indeed!" she said. "But I must leave you. You see," she added, with her fine little touch of dignity, "as yet this house is still Mr. Temple Barholm's home, and I am the grateful recipient of his bounty. Burrill will attend you and make you quite comfortable." With an obeisance which was like a slight curtsy, she turned and fled.

In less than an hour she walked up the neat bricked path, and old Mrs. Hutchinson, looking out, saw her through the tiers of flower-pots in the window. Hutchinson himself was in London, but Ann was reading at the other side of the room.

"Here's poor little owd Miss Temple Barholm aw in a flutter," remarked her grandmother. "Tha's got some work cut out for thee if tha's going to quiet her. Oppen th' door, lass."

Ann opened the door, and stood by it with calm though welcoming dimples.

"Miss Hutchinson "--Miss Alicia began all at once to realize that they did not know each other, and that she had flown to the refuge of her youth without being at all aware of what she was about to say. "Oh!

Little Ann!" she broke down with frank tears. "My poor boy! My poor boy!"

Little Ann drew her inside and closed the door.

"There, Miss Temple Barholm," she said. "There now Just come in and sit down. I'll get you a good cup of tea. You need one."