

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

The Duke of Stone had been sufficiently occupied with one of his slighter attacks of rheumatic gout to have been, so to speak, out of the running in the past weeks. His indisposition had not condemned him to the usual dullness, however. He had suffered less pain than was customary, and Mrs. Braddle had been more than usually interesting in conversation on those occasions when, in making him very comfortable in one way or another, she felt that a measure of entertainment would add to his well-being. His epicurean habit of mind tended toward causing him to find a subtle pleasure in the hearing of various versions of any story whatever. His intimacy with T. Tembarom had furnished forth many an agreeable mental repast for him. He had had T. Tembarom's version of himself, the version of the county, the version of the uneducated class, and his own version. All of these had had varying shades of their own. He had found a cynically fine flavor in Palliser's version, which he had gathered through talk and processes of exclusion and inclusion.

"There is a good deal to be said for it," he summed it up. "It's plausible on ordinary sophisticated grounds. T. Tembarom would say, 'It looks sort of that way.'"

As Mrs. Braddle had done what she could in the matter of expounding her views of the uncertainties of the village attitude, he had

listened with stimulating interest. Mrs. Braddle's version on the passing of T. Tembarom stood out picturesquely against the background of the version which was his own--the one founded on the singular facts he had shared knowledge of with the chief character in the episode. He had not, like Miss Alicia, received a communication from Tembarom. This seemed to him one of the attractive features of the incident. It provided opportunity for speculation. Some wild development had called the youngster away in a rattling hurry. Of what had happened since his departure he knew no more than the villagers knew. What had happened for some months before his going he had watched with the feeling of an intelligently observant spectator at a play. He had been provided with varied emotions by the fantastic drama. He had smiled; he had found himself moved once or twice, and he had felt a good deal of the thrill of curious uncertainty as to what the curtain would rise and fall on. The situation was such that it was impossible to guess. Results could seem only to float in the air. One thing might happen; so might another, so might a dozen more. What he wished really to attain was some degree of certainty as to what was likely to occur in any case to the American Temple Barholm.

He felt, the first time he drove over to call on Miss Alicia, that his indisposition and confinement to his own house had robbed him of something. They had deprived him of the opportunity to observe shades of development and to hear the expressing of views of the situation as it stood. He drove over with views of his own and with anticipations. He had reason to know that he would encounter in the dear lady

indications of the feeling that she had reached a crisis. There was a sense of this crisis impending as one mounted the terrace steps and entered the hall. The men-servants endeavored to wipe from their countenances any expression denoting even a vague knowledge of it. He recognized their laudable determination to do so. Burrill was monumental in the unconsciousness of his outward bearing.

Miss Alicia, sitting waiting on Fate in the library, wore precisely the aspect he had known she would wear. She had been lying awake at night and she had of course wept at intervals, since she belonged to the period the popular female view of which had been that only the unfeeling did not so relieve themselves in crises of the affections. Her eyelids were rather pink and her nice little face was tired.

"It is very, very kind of you to come," she said, when they shook hands. "I wonder "--her hesitance was touching in its obvious appeal to him not to take the wrong side,--"I wonder if you know how deeply troubled I have been?"

"You see, I have had a touch of my abominable gout, and my treasure of a Braddle has been nursing me and gossiping," he answered. "So, of course I know a great deal. None of it true, I dare say. I felt I must come and see you, however."

He looked so neat and entirely within the boundaries of finished and well-dressed modernity and every-day occurrence, in his perfectly

fitting clothes, beautifully shining boots, and delicate fawn gaiters, that she felt a sort of support in his mere aspect. The mind connected such almost dapper freshness and excellent taste only with unexaggerated incidents and a behavior which almost placed the stamp of absurdity upon the improbable in circumstance. The vision of disorderly and illegal possibilities seemed actually to fade into an unreality.

"If Mr. Palford and Mr. Grimby knew him as I know him --as--as you know him--" she added with a faint hopefulness.

"Yes, if they knew him as we know him that would make a different matter of it," admitted the duke, amiably. But, thought Miss Alicia, he might only have put it that way through consideration for her feelings, and because he was an extremely polished man who could not easily reveal to a lady a disagreeable truth. He did not speak with the note of natural indignation which she thought she must have detected if he had felt as she felt herself. He was of course a man whose manner had always the finish of composure. He did not seem disturbed or even very curious--only kind and most polite.

"If we only knew where he was!" she began again. "If we only knew where Mr. Strangeways was!"

"My impression is that Messrs. Palford & Grimby will probably find them both before long," he consoled her. "They are no doubt exciting

themselves unnecessarily."

He was not agitated at all; she felt. it would have been kinder if he had been a little agitated. He was really not the kind of person whose feelings appeared very deep, being given to a light and graceful cynicism of speech which delighted people; so perhaps it was not natural that he should express any particular emotion even in a case affecting a friend--surely he had been Temple's friend. But if he had seemed a little distressed, or doubtful or annoyed, she would have felt that she understood better his attitude. As it was, he might almost have been on the other side--a believer or a disbeliever--or merely a person looking on to see what would happen. When they sat down, his glance seemed to include her with an interest which was sympathetic but rather as if she were a child whom he would like to pacify. This seemed especially so when she felt she must make clear to him the nature of the crisis which was pending, as he had felt when he entered the house.

"You perhaps do not know"--the appeal which had shown itself in her eyes was in her voice--"that the solicitors have decided, after a great deal of serious discussion and private inquiry in London, that the time has come when they must take open steps."

"In the matter of investigation?" he inquired.

"They are coming here this afternoon with Captain Palliser to--to

question the servants, and some of the villagers. They will question me," alarmedly.

"They would be sure to do that,"--he really seemed quite to envelop her with kindness--"but I beg of you not to be alarmed. Nothing you could have to say could possibly do harm to Temple Barholm." He knew it was her fear of this contingency which terrified her.

"You do feel sure of that?" she burst forth, relievedly. "You do-- because you know him?"

"I do. Let us be calm, dear lady. Let us be calm."

"I will! I will!" she protested. "But Captain Palliser has arranged that a lady should come here--a lady who disliked poor Temple very much. She was most unjust to him."

"Lady Joan Fayre?" he suggested, and then paused with a remote smile as if lending himself for the moment to some humor he alone detected in the situation.

"She will not injure his cause, I think I can assure you."

"She insisted on misunderstanding him. I am so afraid--"

The appearance of Pearson at the door interrupted her and caused her

to rise from her seat. The neat young man was pale and spoke in a nervously lowered voice.

"I beg pardon, Miss. I beg your Grace's pardon for intruding, but--"

Miss Alicia moved toward him in such a manner that he himself seemed to feel that he might advance.

"What is it, Pearson? Have you anything special to say?"

"I hope I am not taking too great a liberty, Miss, but I did come in for a purpose, knowing that his Grace was with you and thinking you might both kindly advise me. It is about Mr. Temple Barholm, your Grace--" addressing him as if in involuntary recognition of the fact that he might possibly prove the greater support.

"Our Mr. Temple Barholm, Pearson? We are being told there are two of them." The duke's delicate emphasis on the possessive pronoun was delightful, and it so moved and encouraged sensitive little Pearson that he was emboldened to answer with modest firmness:

"Yes,--ours. Thank you, your Grace."

"You feel him yours too, Pearson?" a shade more delightfully still.

"I--I take the liberty, your Grace, of being deeply attached to him,

and more than grateful."

"What did you want to ask advice about?"

"The family solicitors. Captain Palliser and Lady Joan Fayre and Mr. and Miss Hutchinson are to be here shortly, and I have been told I am to be questioned. What I want to know, your Grace, is--" He paused, and looked no longer pale but painfully red as he gathered himself together for his anxious outburst--"Must I speak the truth?"

Miss Alicia started alarmedly.

The duke looked down at the delicate fawn gaiters covering his fine instep. His fleeting smile was not this time an external one.

"Do you not wish to speak the truth, Pearson?"

Pearson's manner could have been described only as one of obstinate frankness.

"No, your Grace. I do not! Your Grace may misunderstand me--but I do not!"

His Grace tapped the gaiters with the slight ebony cane he held in his hand.



"Is this "--he put it with impartial curiosity--"because the truth might be detrimental to our Mr. Temple Barholm?"

"If you please, your Grace," Pearson made a firm step forward, "what is the truth?"

"That is what Messrs. Palford & Grimby seem determined to find out. Probably only our Mr. Temple Barholm can tell them."

"Your Grace, what I'm thinking of is that if I tell the truth it may seem to prove something that's not the truth."

"What kinds of things, Pearson?" still impartially.

"I can be plain with your Grace. Things like this: I was with Mr. Temple Barholm and Mr. Strangeways a great deal. They'll ask me about what I heard. They'll ask me if Mr. Strangeways was willing to go away to the doctor; if he had to be persuaded and argued with. Well, he had and he hadn't, your Grace. At first, just the mention of it would upset him so that Mr. Temple Barholm would have to stop talking about it and quiet him down. But when he improved--and he did improve wonderfully, your Grace--he got into the way of sitting and thinking it over and listening quite quiet. But if I'm asked suddenly--"

"What you are afraid of is that you may be asked point-blank questions without warning?" his Grace put it with the perspicacity of

experience.

"That's why I should be grateful for advice. Must I tell the truth, your Grace, when it will make them believe things I'd swear are lies-- I'd swear it, your Grace."

"So would I, Pearson." His serene lightness was of the most baffling, but curiously supporting, order. "This being the case, my advice would be not to go into detail. Let us tell white lies--all of us--without a shadow of hesitancy. Miss Temple Barholm, even you must do your best."

"I will try--indeed, I will try!" And the Duke felt her tremulously ardent assent actually delicious.

"There! we'll consider that settled, Pearson," he said.

"Thank you, your Grace. Thank you, Miss," Pearson's relieved gratitude verged on the devout. He turned to go, and as he did so his attention was arrested by an approach he remarked through a window.

"Mr. and Miss Hutchinson are arriving now, Miss," he announced, hastily.

"They are to be brought in here," said Miss Alicia.

The duke quietly left his seat and went to look through the window

with frank and unembarrassed interest in the approach. He went, in fact, to look at Little Ann, and as he watched her walk up the avenue, her father lumbering beside her, he evidently found her aspect sufficiently arresting.

"Ah!" he exclaimed softly, and paused. "What a lot of very nice red hair," he said next. And then, "No wonder! No wonder!"

"That, I should say," he remarked as Miss Alicia drew near, "is what I once heard a bad young man call `a deserving case.'"

He was conscious that she might have been privately a little shocked by such aged flippancy, but she was at the moment perturbed by something else.

"The fact is that I have never spoken to Hutchinson," she fluttered.

"These changes are very confusing. I suppose I ought to say Mr. Hutchinson, now that he is such a successful person, and Temple--"

"Without a shadow of a doubt!" The duke seemed struck by the happiness of the idea. "They will make him a peer presently. He may address me as 'Stone' at any moment. One must learn to adjust one's self with agility. `The old order changeth.' Ah! she is smiling at him and I see the dimples."

Miss Alicia made a clean breast of it.

"I went to her--I could not help it! " she confessed. "I was in such distress and dare not speak to anybody. Temple had told me that she was so wonderful. He said she always understood and knew what to do."

"Did she in this case?" he asked, smiling.

Miss Alicia's manner was that of one who could express the extent of her admiration only in disconnected phrases.

"She was like a little rock. Such a quiet, firm way! Such calm certainty! Oh, the comfort she has been to me! I begged her to come here to-day. I did not know her father had returned."

"No doubt he will have testimony to give which will be of the greatest assistance," the duke said most encouragingly. "Perhaps he will be a sort of rock."

"I--I don't in the least know what he will be!" sighed Miss Alicia, evidently uncertain in her views.

But when the father and daughter were announced she felt that his Grace was really enchanting in the happy facility of his manner. He at least adjusted himself with agility. Hutchinson was of course lumbering. Lacking the support of T. Tembarom's presence and incongruity, he himself was the incongruous feature. He would have

been obliged to bluster by way of sustaining himself, even if he had only found himself being presented to Miss Alicia; but when it was revealed to him that he was also confronted with the greatest personage of the neighborhood, he became as hot and red as he had become during certain fateful business interviews. More so, indeed.

"Th' other chaps hadn't been dukes;" and to Hutchinson the old order had not yet so changed that a duke was not an awkwardly impressive person to face unexpectedly.

The duke's manner of shaking hands with him, however, was even touched with an amiable suggestion of appreciation of the value of a man of genius. He had heard of the invention, in fact knew some quite technical things about it. He realized its importance. He had congratulations for the inventor and the world of inventions so greatly benefited.

"Lancashire must be proud of your success, Mr. Hutchinson." How agreeably and with what ease he said it!

"Aye, it's a success now, your Grace," Hutchinson answered, "but I might have waited a good bit longer if it hadn't been for that lad an' his bold backing of me."

"Mr. Temple Barholm?" said the duke.

"Aye. He's got th' way of making folks see things that they can't see even when they're hitting them in th' eyes. I'd that lost heart I could never have done it myself."

"But now it is done," smiled his Grace. "Delightful!"

"I've got there--same as they say in New York--I've got there," said Hutchinson.

He sat down in response to Miss Alicia's invitation. His unease was wonderfully dispelled. He felt himself a person of sufficient importance to address even a duke as man to man.

"What's all this romancin' talk about th' other Temple Barholm comin' back, an' our lad knowin' an' hidin' him away? An' Palliser an' th' lawyers an' th' police bein' after 'em both?"

"You have heard the whole story?" from the duke.

"I've heard naught else since I come back."

"Grandmother knew a great deal before we came home," said Little Ann.

The duke turned his attention to her with an engaged smile. His look, his bow, his bearing, in the moment of their being presented to each other, had seemed to Miss Alicia the most perfect thing. His fine eye

had not obviously wandered while he talked to her father, but it had in fact been taking her in with an inclusiveness not likely to miss agreeable points of detail.

"What is her opinion, may I ask?" he said. "What does she say?"

"Grandmother is very set in her ways, your Grace." The limpidity of her blue eye and a flickering dimple added much to the quaint comprehensiveness of her answer. "She says the world's that full of fools that if they were all killed the Lord would have to begin again with a new Adam and Eve."

"She has entire faith in Mr. Temple Barholm--as you have," put forward his Grace.

"Mine's not faith exactly. I know him," Little Ann answered, her tone as limpid as her eyes.

"There's more than her has faith in him," broke forth Hutchinson.

"Danged if I don't like th' way them village chaps are taking it.

They're ready to fight over it. Since they've found out what it's come to, an' about th' lawyers comin' down, they're talkin' about gettin' up a kind o' demonstration."

"Delightful!" ejaculated his Grace again. He leaned forward. "Quite what I should have expected. There's a good deal of beer drunk, I

suppose."

"Plenty o' beer, but it'll do no harm." Hutchinson began to chuckle.

"They're talkin' o' gettin' out th' fife an' drum band an' marchin' round th' village with a calico banner with 'Vote for T. Tembarom' painted on it, to show what they think of him."

The duke chuckled also.

"I wonder how he's managed it?" he laughed. "They wouldn't do it for any of the rest of us, you know, though I've no doubt we're quite as deserving. I am, I know."

Hutchinson stopped laughing and turned on Miss Alicia.

"What's that young woman comin' down here for?" he inquired.

"Lady Joan was engaged to Mr. James Temple Barholm," Miss Alicia answered.

"Eh! Eh!" Hutchinson jerked out. "That'll turn her into a wildcat, I'll warrant. She'll do all th' harm she can. I'm much obliged to you for lettin' us come, ma'am. I want to be where I can stand by him."

"Father," said Little Ann, "what you have got to remember is that you mustn't fly into a passion. You know you've always said it never did



any good, and it only sends the blood to your head."

"You are not nervous, Miss Hutchinson?" the duke suggested.

"About Mr. Temple Barholm? I couldn't be, your Grace. If I was to see two policemen bringing him in handcuffed I shouldn't be nervous. I should know the handcuffs didn't belong to him, and the policemen would look right-down silly to me."

Miss Alicia fluttered over to fold her in her arms.

"Do let me kiss you," she said. "Do let me, Little Ann!"

Little Ann had risen at once to meet her embrace. She put a hand on her arm.

"We don't know anything about this really," she said. "We've only heard what people say. We haven't heard what he says. I'm going to wait." They were all looking at her,-- the duke with such marked interest that she turned toward him as she ended. "And if I had to wait until I was as old as grandmother I'd wait--and nothing would change my mind."

"And I've been lying awake at night!" softly wailed Miss Alicia.