THESE WOMEN

BY INEZ THOMPSON

THE duchess had delicately expressed a desire for a quiet afternoon—"Just ourselves for tea, if it *could* be managed!"—but the gratification of that whim seemed to afford her small satisfaction.

With a smile that he believed was merely amused and not at all proud, Pen looked over his shoulder to his lovely companion, sure of finding her thawed and diverted and interested. She was not in her chair. She was passing behind him. Around the hedge a manservant came into sight, trundling the tea cart.

"Camilla!" At the half-questioning, half-peremptory utterance of her name the duchess looked back; but she did not stop.

"Why—er—here's tea!" said Pen. In the back of his head was stirring the recollection that Sue had said Camilla didn't care for children. But was she leaving because of that?

"Thanks—but I believe I don't care for it after all," she called back. "There *are* so many letters to do that I really——"

Just here Remsen Bond, uncertain in the legs, swerved and fell against the knees of the grown-up. The duchess, not looking at him, said sharply: "Sue! Take him away —*please!*".

In four strides Pen had reached her, taken the boy and got back to his chair. He had seen Sue's face, in its flash of incredulous, hurt motherhood and he didn't trust himself to speak. Sue, though, gathered herself, made a polite little murmur, mentioned tea —and was snubbed.

"She hasn't hinted how long she means to stay," Sue said presently as she smoothed and rumpled the blond hair that invited her touch. Pen sighed.

"Poor old petterkin! You're all nervoused up over this darned—this business of fussy company and callers. And it's been a hot summer. But I'm all right, honey girl, and so's Youngster. Just you cry it out if it'll—Eh? Wh—" The chair creaked as he surged up. "Why, you don't—*Clif'*, by all that's good!"

She forgot her tears in sheer surprise as she found herself on her feet facing a young man who stood before them, silently; a tall, motor-coated, very dusty young man whose tanned face was drawn and weary, whose agate eyes were puckered, under his frowning brows, with long waking and watching and anxiety that dragged and tightened his good-humored mouth. He looked little like a casual caller, and not at all like a fitting husband for Camilla. Nevertheless it was that most fortunate individual, His Grace of Storrington, who was supposed to be, at that moment, with a yachting party in Norway.

Without a word he dropped his cap and gave his hands to Pen's grip and Sue's welcoming clasp with a fervor that approached desperation.

"Where is she?" he demanded—very huskily because of fatigue and the dust in his throat. "Nothing has happened to her? She's *here*, isn't she?"

"Camilla is here and she's quite all right."

"Ah—that is good. Thanks, awfully." The duke had himself in hand when she got to him with the fragrant beverage; and he took it thirstily, sat straight with a squaring of his dusty shoulders and explained himself with characteristic brevity.

"I asked to be shown to you straight, because I didn't want to set comment going by asking for Camilla and being refused; and I wasn't certain she was here! When I saw—I *hope* you'll forgive my clumsiness! —when I saw Sue—er—crying, I can't tell what I thought. I'm a bit fagged, and I jumped at upsetting conclusions. I begin to see that you don't know what has happened."

"Happened?" faltered Sue. With a very gentle touch Pen drew her back to her chair and stood beside her.

"What *has* happened?" he asked quietly.

"Camilla," the duke answered, with a quiet of the surface only, "has left me."

Remsen Bond had sat bolt upright for minutes staring at the incomprehensible conduct of the giants that ruled his world; but finding their actions quite beyond any sensible small person's understanding he turned with philosophic indifference to his own affairs.

"All wall!" he commanded. "All wall!" And struggled up and across to the newcomer, who was nearest, leaning with fine democracy against the dusty coat. "*Oo* all wall?" he wheedled, smiling irresistibly.

The duke did a gentlemanly and unforgettable thing. He smiled back—actually smiled!—took the fat, gay sphere with intelligent and respectful solemnity. "Right —oh, general!" said he; and rolled the ball, as had been ordered, far down the emerald aisle between the trees, whereupon the autocrat started after, violently, giving tongue to the joy of the chase.

Sue gave her faith instantly to the man who could do that tremendously significant little thing; but at the pathos of it her tears started and she caught at Pen's hand that closed on hers in understanding.

"We haven't guessed anything like this," he answered for them both. "If you feel you can—or care to—tell us more——"

"Very few words will tell you all I know!" Now that the anxiety was lessened, one saw that the duke's youthful face could show a surprising stubbornness—or resolution, as one chose. "Things haven't gone well from the beginning. No quarrel—no differences that I could lay my finger on; but just haven't gone well! I'm hideously sorry to bring this unpleasantness to you, but——"

"Oh—please!" choked Sue. "Pen—tell him we'll help him—that we won't *let* this thing go on——"

"I fancy he knows all that," said Pen. "Now go in, like a dear girl, and have a word with 'Milla. If there's any talk of her leaving, let me know." He looked, on that word, vastly more stubborn than the dusty duke. "She must stay here till some sensible arrangement can be made, if we have to lock her in! See to getting a room and bath ready for Clif'—we'll come presently and I'll tend to Boy."

Intent at once, as he had known she would be, on making a weary man comfortable, Sue hurried up to the house. Both men looked after her a moment, then their eyes met.

"Soon as she has Camilla out of the way, we'll go in," said Pen. "I fancy you need something more than her blessed tea. Now, if you like, let loose."

Whatever additional information he may have obtained from that confidence he had no opportunity to impart to his wife. Sue came to his dressing-room after her own hasty toilet, to lay her unhappy discoveries before him.

"I'm afraid it's gone too far to stop," she began breathlessly. "'Milla admitted that she expected he'd come after her—that's why she asked to be alone to-day."

"Is 'Milla coming down to dinner, or must she be brought?"

"I made her see she must come. But Pen! She says Clifton has *always* been too attentive to other women. 'Milla was hardly home with him before a cousin of Clifton's told her all about some creature and—Penfield Bond, *what did you say!*"

"I said, 'God bless all gossips and show 'em the error of their ways,'" Pen answered glibly. And he met her severe eyes with bland innocence.

"It didn't sound like 'bless'—or the rest of it. Well, anyway, Camilla wasn't going to let that woman think she was *afraid* of her, so she had some people just as soon as she could, and asked *her*. The woman is a titled Somebody, you know, in spite of her way."

"Possibly because of it!" Pen grinned. Whereupon Sue turned to the door.

"Sue—Sue, come back here, you little goose!"

"But I don't think you should joke about it," she protested, presently lifting her head from his shirt-sleeved shoulder.

"Then I won't. But it isn't our affair, after all; and what's more it couldn't be—could it?"

"N-no," said Sue, faintly. Over her head he smiled, but tenderly.

"Louder next time, Mrs. Bond, if you please. Now! It couldn't happen to us—Look at me and answer. Could it?" He lifted her chin so that she saw his eyes. "Could it?" he asked, in a different tone.

"Oh—no, no, dear," she cried remorsefully. "Not to *us!*"

"I foresee," said Pen, getting into his coat, after that little stirring of the depths, "that we'll have a fine cool dinner in spite of the—What ever is the matter *now*, girl?"

"Four people coming to dinner—and I forgot to 'phone them not to," she told him, horrified. "And others to come for bridge, later——"

"Well, what of it?" Pen was calm. "With others here, 'Milla can't be too nasty, and having a duke thrown in, unexpectedly, will please our republican friends. It'll go off all right."

Camilla was several degrees more "duchessy" (to use his own term), and even more lovely than usual, though she was as pale and frosty as the crystal-embroidered chiffons she wore. Storrington seemed wholly at ease. His meeting with Camilla in the drawing-room before the arrival of the dinner guests had been as casual and friendly as though her absence had been but a shopping trip to town, and she, perforce, had answered in kind. As she told Sue, it mattered little,—she had no vulgar end to gain by haste, and she could delay the announcement of the intention until he saw how hopeless coercion would prove, and take himself away again.

That very courtesy and icy calm of the two set Sue rose-pink with nervousness; but she carried herself and covered Camilla's aloofness, through the ordeal, in a manner that called forth Pen's unqualified approval. No one was overmuch surprised that the duchess stayed apart when the tables were set out; and when she was found to have disappeared, later, and Sue explained the dreadful headache that had compelled the withdrawal, there was no embarrassment of doubt among her hearers. The duke more than compensated. At supper he made himself so fascinating that two motors were kept waiting for an hour after the rest had gone so that a certain gifted amateur, a visitor in the summer colony, might try over her songs with the duke. It gave Sue a bad hour,—for he sang love songs after such fashion that even the heart he had estranged must have ached with regret that it answered no longer. With a great sigh of relief she said good-night, after the gifted amateur and music-loving others were sped, and hastened up to Camilla. She had not expected to get in easily; but she was admitted at once to the hot, brilliantly-lighted sitting-room where a tragic figure was pacing. So she *had* heard him! She whipped her white draperies about and showed an icily furious face.

THE SELF SHE HAD BEEN HAD ACTED INCREDIBLY FOOLISH AND BEEN INCREDIBLY MISERABLE

"Will you tell me," she demanded, "what this latest humiliation means?"

Sue stopped short. "Humil——"

"Yes, humiliation! Insult! Outrage!" Camilla began pacing again. "I sent down for a car—station cart—anything! to take me to the eleven-thirty train, only to find that Pen had given orders that neither car nor horse was to be taken out without his knowledge. Fancy hearing that from my maid—my *maid!*" Sue missed the point of the complaint.

"Do you mean you really meant to run away, 'Milla!"

"Do you think I mean to stay under the roof with *him?*" Camilla flashed. "This action is indecent in Pen—detestable, cowardly——"

"Camilla!" Whether or no a reminiscence of that long ago slap was in Sue's amazing tone, it had effect. Camilla tossed her beautiful head, but was silent. Sue relented.

"Some day you'll be glad you couldn't go, dear. It isn't safe, in a matter so terribly important, to hurry one step. Tomorrow, when we're all rested, we'll talk things over. It's dreadfully hot in here, with all these lights on and the windows closed, 'Milla."

"I shut them," said Camilla, "to keep out his singing. That shows how deeply he cares,—he could *sing!* I want the lights to keep out the moonshine,—it creeps in under the shades. I hate it!"

But she did not protest when Sue snapped off half the lights and opened the windows. Coolness and moonlight and flower scents flooded in, with the pleasant tang of cigar smoke from the veranda below, where Pen was talking, very low. There began the velvet plinking of Sue's guitar, that Storrington had picked up from her chair there; and softly he began to sing "La Mia Letzia"—"Thou and I, Sweetheart." Camilla dropped face down on the couch and covered her ears.

By afternoon of the next day, however, Sue wasn't at all sure that she hadn't dreamed that little scene, for Camilla had withdrawn into a shell of silence, chill sweetness and placidity that defied the penetration of any mere human. In her basket chair with a book she read and waited the tea hour—an enigma that apparently didn't wish anyone's solving. The duke, his early morning optimism lost behind a thunderous cloud of sullen endurance, smoked too many cigars on the veranda. Pen and Sue in desperation took themselves to the tennis court, played a set with almost vicious energy, and sat down, somewhat relieved, to weigh chances.

"I'm willing to bet that if she would wear a short skirt like yours, I could talk to her," said Pen moodily. "What is it about just clothes that impresses a man so! Take a stunning girl like 'Milla and add those expensive-looking, traily, dignified get-ups, and a fellow'd no more think of bullying her than he would of getting personal with the Goddess of Liberty."

Sue rolled the ball about in her tilted racket.

"I suppose that's more or less true," she admitted. "The only one of us that isn't impressed by her elegance is the Babe—he didn't even know she tried to snub him." Pen smiled.

"That's right,—he—" The sentence stopped so abruptly that Sue looked about at him. He was staring straight at her, mouth open, eyes narrowed, an expression of incredulous hope and shrewdness lighting his face. She dropped the racket.

"Pen! You don't mean you've thought —" He held up a hushing hand.

"Wait! I don't know, yet, whether it's an idea or lunacy. But—by my suffering soul!—I believe it's—" Again the sentence hung suspended. But all at once, so suddenly that Sue jumped, he thumped the ground, scrambled up, started off at a trot, came back and pulled her to her feet with an excited tug.

"Are you game?" he hissed. "Will you do as I say? Will you love, honor and obey me this once, and give it a try?" Sue wriggled.

"Will you stop being a silly and tell me what? Of course I——"

"Well, see you don't go back on your word. I'm going to take Boy down where she is and leave him for her to——"

"*Penfield*——"

"There you go! What *is* a woman's word good for? Listen till I'm done. I'll tell Jane we'll take care of him for a time. I'll tell 'Milla that Jane is—oh, something, that the maids are busy, that we've got to be away for an hour, and in sheer decency she'll have to take care of him. I'll put Clif' on and have him oversee the business. What I want is to get her *mad* enough so she'll talk. Do you begin to see? Babe doesn't know her kind from any other woman-slave—*yet;* and he'll give her a reason for being!"

"But it's almost his nap time, Pen. If he—if she—should slap him——"

"If she tries that," said Pen grimly, "I shall have it arranged that Clif' is to interfere and beat her. He's about ready to. Only he's as impressed as I am—except that he doesn't know it—with her superiority. What they need is a good, human, impolite, *married* experience. Now *you* needn't do any lying—just go get ready and have the car 'round."

She was waiting, resolutely quiet, when Pen ran down the steps, jumped in beside her and took the wheel. They were a mile away before she turned an apprehensive eye toward him. From chuckling Pen laughed outright.

"If you could have seen her face! I dropped him in her lap, talking fast,—he had his woolly lamb and flourished it and caught her on the nose,—right on her 'ristocratic, nice little nose!" Sue gasped.

"I don't think I care whether they make up or not. He *never* has been slapped!"

"Shucks, honey! 'Milla isn't an ogress. Seems to me I'd like it if you would pretend to be glad to go with me—just as you did before there was any baby to crowd me out of the reckoning."

"Pen—!" He gave himself the luxury of feeding on that look of hers for a half second, then allowed her to see that he was convinced; and presently allowed himself to be happy again.

"I'd given a button to've had you see her expression," he said again. "I told Clif' to go down and offer to take charge of the Boy."

"Maybe she'll let him." Sue brightened.

"Maybe nothing! She wouldn't forego the pleasure of snubbing Clif' just one time more, in that pluperfect way of hers; but that will give him an excuse to sit by and observe."

It came to pass even as he had foretold. For some seconds Remsen Bond let his head lie against the lacy breast whereto his father had consigned him. Yesterday had been a day of adventure, of glorious departure from his routine of carefully arranged experience, but that had been after his nap. To-day was being different, but he wasn't ready for it. He stared solemnly at the tall man who approached and said something to her upon whose lap he sat; but when she answered in a tone that made one feel as when one has swallowed a too large spoonful of ice-cream, he grew vaguely uneasy and looked about for his mother. She was not to be seen. He twisted and looked up at the strange face above him.

"Ma!" he ordered briefly, emotion abbreviating the dear name.

No living person had ever seen the Duchess of Storrington as embarrassed as she was at that instant. What she might have said or done was made impossible by the scrutiny of the perfidious male whose offer of assistance had just been loftily rejected.

"M-ma!" It was an uncertain, heart-appealing utterance this time, and the cherry lips formed it unsteadily. The duchess looked about in the vain hope of seeing someone to whom to transfer her charge; and he took that instant in which to writhe himself from her lap with amazing celerity,—tripped over her shoe and fell flat.

"Oh—oh—don't!" She clutched at the white bundle in terror, but it rolled from under her hand, struggled to its stomach, lifted its head and whimpered ominously. The duke got up, stooped, and gathered the hapless one capably.

"Ah!" sighed the duchess, relieved. But with an expressionless face the rescuer put the protesting little body back in her arms. There was no reason for the bright pink that surged to her cheeks, except that the strong hands that touched hers, and the stubborn chin had brushed her hair as he bent,—contact probably distasteful to her. He straightened at once.

"He wants his mother," he enlightened her kindly. "Perhaps if you could talk to him—show him things or sing to him——"

"Perhaps," she interrupted hurriedly, "you'd do better with him, after all." It was the white flag, that speech; for she had not directly addressed him since his unwelcome arrival. He shook his head with an air of self-denial.

"Impossible. I'll just stay by to help out." Their eyes met and hers were no longer cool—a spark was livening in them. She was growing angry even as that wizard of a Penny Bond had predicted.

The luckless bait in her arms curved, suddenly and convexly after a fashion that all but repeated his first coming to grief, flung his woolly lamb aside and struck out with arms and legs. And he screamed.

"Dane! Do Dane—Dane!" he shrieked, crimsoning to an alarming tint.

"Jane is his nurse," said the duke, conversationally, returning to his chair. The spark glinted in promising fashion.

"If you'd go away—please," she suggested, "I think I could manage." He rose instantly, his expression politely dubious.

"Do you think so? Shan't I try to find a healthy looking maid to come for him? They're all clean—perhaps Sue wouldn't mind, for once, in spite of her germ scares. If you think you can manage him till I can get——"

The crust of her composure cracked. Long pent anger and resentment seethed in her visibly, swept away her artificial sweetness, rose to her lips; but even as the weakening, humanizing tide broke in an inarticulate ejaculation, the innocent cause of it checked the outbreak he had been sacrificed to bring to pass. In all his short life he had known but the tenderness of women. Even when, for inscrutable reasons, things of his desire had been withheld, they had denied with tenderness and shared his sorrow, and sometimes—to their shame!—given way. So with the trustful abandon and inborn guile of that consciousness he yielded to the arms he desired to quit, appealed where he had raged, blandished where he could not master; and with a pathetic moan of "Dane! Dane!" he cuddled back to the lacy breast, held her tight with his dimpled arms and let his soul-dissolving tears have way.

The duchess drooped over him as swiftly and instinctively as one covers a wound. She gathered him to her as close and firmly as could the most accustomed arms.

"There—there—auntie's precious boy! There, darling," she crooned; and with the immemorial cradling, "mothering" sway, got to her feet and began to walk with him, back and forth, hushing, murmuring, with never a glance at the stupefied witness of the miracle. The duke sat, weakly.

Bulging roots and twigs caught in those draperies Penny Bond had deprecated; stained, ripped zigzags in the filmy stuff tore off little hems and ribbon bindings and trailed them in forlorn wisps yards behind the pacing figure that moved, oblivious, eyes on the flaxen head against her bosom. The murmur drifted into a wordless song, as natural and as soothing as the drone of the bees among the flowers, the plash of the fountain, the meditative whisper of the warm, lazy wind. The sobs trailed off to sighs—to long breaths. Desire and Duplicity were lost in the need of a nap. Caught in his own toils, hanging lead-heavy, flushed, kissable and angelic, the injured one slept.

The humming faded to a mere whisper of sound, she paced more slowly. Her cheeks were peony pink with heat, the piled coils of hair were askew, the tendrils clung in moist, pale gold rings at her forehead and nape of neck. Very gradually and cautiously, still swaying her burden, she got to her chair and rested in it with a soft gasp of fatigue—And looked up to meet her husband's eyes.

How long that look lasted or when he got across to her, neither knew. It seemed inevitable and natural that he should be on his knees before her, arms laid up about her, his face with its odd look of hunger and triumph, bent over her bare forearm, where his lips burned adoringly. She looked down on him mildly, maternally, from the remoteness of her awakened, brooding woman-self, —that center so vastly remote from woman selfishness. The self she had been had acted incredibly foolish and been incredibly miserable. But that was over for always, of course. Men were children. She freed her left hand and laid it gently on the sun-burned brown head.

They went up to the house, after a time, the duke carrying the sleeping boy, the charmingly disheveled girl—who looked not at all a duchess!—shielding her eyes from the sun. Penny and Sue, reconnoitering, came stealthily out on the veranda—and met them full.

"The minute I saw that her chin was tucked in and her lip-corners turned up, I knew it was all right," Pen declared with infinite complacence as he arranged his tie before Sue's smallest mirror. He had invaded her dressing-room to utilize the few minutes before dinner in bragging of his strategy and its success.

"But it came in a much nicer way than *you* planned," argued Sue. "She says that the sight of our happiness nearly *killed* her, Pen, but that she couldn't leave us,—she says she knew if she *did* take him back it would be here, but she didn't see how she ever could! And she says she worshiped the Babe, all the time, but she knew if she touched him she should just break down and have hysterics. I know *precisely* how she felt! She says she doesn't see why girls aren't taught that their only happiness lies in having a family to keep them from fads and foolishness."

"She is a very wise young woman," said Pen, winking abominably at his own reflection.

"Isn't she?" said Sue warmly. Whereat he had the grace to be ashamed, and went over and kissed her shoulder.

"My, but you're swagger to-night!" he observed. She faced about and took him by a button.

"Do you like this gown?"

"Altogether too well. My admiration for you is too ardent to be comfortable."

"Silly! Is it? But Pen, dear——"

"Yes? . . . Why so long a pause, Sweetness?"

"Well—you know what you said about long skirts, to-day,—do you ever think that you'd like me to wear long skirts, always, and not play tennis, but to be more dignified and—and matronly, now that I have Boy? —more, perhaps, like Camilla?"

He took the busy hand in both his own.

"Sue—" he said. She looked up. And at what she saw was silenced and a bit awed. Slowly she flushed. Her eyes grew purple as pansies, her exquisite mouth trembled into a shamed smile, and she lifted her free hand and shut out that dear truth and reproach.

"Don't!" she begged,—though he had not spoken a word. "I—Pen, I don't suppose I mean half these silly things I ask you. It's just because I'm a woman, I guess. But that's all *any* woman is—just a woman!"

"That great truth is dawning on me," he said, "by degrees."