

Hornung Ernest William

My Lord Duke



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CHAPTER I

THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

The Home Secretary leant his golf-clubs against a chair. His was the longest face of all.

"I am only sorry it should have come now," said Claude apologetically.

"Just as we were starting for the links! Our first day, too!" muttered the Home Secretary.

"I think of Claude," remarked his wife. "I can never tell you, Claude, how much I feel for you! We shall miss you dreadfully, of course; but we couldn't expect to enjoy ourselves after this; and I think, in the circumstances, that you are quite right to go up to town at once."

"Why?" cried the Home Secretary warmly. "What good can he do in the Easter holidays? Everybody will be away; he'd much better come with me and fill his lungs with fresh air."

"I can never tell you how much I feel for you," repeated Lady Caroline to Claude Lafont.

"Nor I," said Olivia. "It's too horrible! I don't believe it. To think of their finding him after all! I don't believe they *have* found him. You've made some mistake, Claude. You've forgotten your code; the cable really means that they've *not* found him, and are giving up the search!"

Claude Lafont shook his head.

"There may be something in what Olivia says," remarked the Home Secretary. "The mistake may have been made at the other end. It would bear talking over on the links."

Claude shook his head again.

"We have no reason to suppose there has been a mistake at all, Mr. Sellwood. Cripps is not the kind of man to make mistakes; and I can swear to my code. The word means, 'Duke found – I sail with him at once.'"

"An Australian Duke!" exclaimed Olivia.

"A blackamoor, no doubt," said Lady Caroline with conviction.

"Your kinsman, in any case," said Claude Lafont, laughing; "and my cousin; and the head of the family from this day forth."

"It was madness!" cried Lady Caroline softly. "Simple madness – but then all you poets *are* mad! Excuse me, Claude, but you remind me of the Lafont blood in my own veins – you make it boil. I feel as if I never could forgive you! To turn up your nose at one of the oldest titles in the three kingdoms; to think twice about a purely hypothetical heir at the antipodes; and actually to send out your solicitor to hunt him up! If that was not Quixotic lunacy, I should like to know what is?"

The Right Honourable George Sellwood took a new golf-ball from his pocket, and bowed his white head mournfully as he stripped off the tissue paper.

"My dear Lady Caroline, *noblesse oblige* – and a man must do his obvious duty," he heard Claude saying, in his slightly pedantic fashion. "Besides, I should have cut a very sorry figure had I jumped at the throne, as it were, and sat there until I was turned out. One knew there *had* been an heir in Australia; the only thing was to find out if he was still alive; and Cripps has done so. I'm bound to say I had given him up. Cripps has written quite hopelessly of late. He must have found the scent and followed it up during the last six weeks; but in another six he will be here to tell us all about it – and we shall see the Duke. Meanwhile, pray don't waste your sympathies upon *me*. To be perfectly frank, this is in many ways a relief to me – I am only sorry it has come now. You know my tastes; but I have hitherto found it expedient to make a little secret of my opinions. Now, however, there can be no harm in my saying that they are not entirely in harmony with the

hereditary principle. You hold up your hands, dear Lady Caroline, but I assure you that my seat in the Upper Chamber would have been a seat of conscientious thorns. In fact I have been in a difficulty, ever since my grandfather's death, which I am very thankful to have removed. On the other hand, I love my – may I say my art? And luckily I have enough to cultivate the muse on, at all events, the best of oatmeal; so I am not to be pitied. A good quatrain, Olivia, is more to me than coronets; and the society of my literary friends is dearer to my heart than that of all the peers in Christendom."

Claude was a poet; when he forgot this fact he was also an excellent fellow. His affectations ended with his talk. In appearance he was distinctly desirable. He had long, clean limbs, a handsome, shaven, mild-eyed face, and dark hair as short as another's. He would have made an admirable Duke.

Mr. Sellwood looked up a little sharply from his dazzling new golf-ball.

"Why go to town at all?" said he.

"Well, the truth is, I have been in a false position all these months," replied Claude, forgetting his poetry and becoming natural at once. "I want to get out of it without a day's unnecessary delay. This thing must be made public."

The statesman considered.

"I suppose it must," said he, judicially.

"Undoubtedly," said Lady Caroline, looking from Olivia to Claude. "The sooner the better."

"Not at all," said the Home Secretary. "It has kept nearly a year. Surely it can keep another week? Look here, my good fellow. I come down here expressly to play golf with you, and you want to bunker me in the very house! I take it for the week for nothing else, and you want to desert me the very first morning. You shan't do either, so that's all about it."

"You're a perfect tyrant!" cried Lady Caroline. "I'm ashamed of you, George; and I hope Claude will do exactly as he likes. *I* shall be sorry enough to lose him, goodness knows!"

"So shall I," said Olivia simply.

Lady Caroline shuddered.

"Look at the day!" cried Mr. Sellwood, jumping up with his pink face glowing beneath his virile silver hair. "Look at the sea! Look at the sand! Look at the sea-breeze lifting the very carpet under our feet! Was there ever such a day for golf?"

Claude wavered visibly.

"Come on," said Mr. Sellwood, catching up his clubs. "I'm awfully sorry for you, my boy. But come on!"

"You will have to give in, Claude," said Olivia, who loved her father.

Lady Caroline shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course," said she, "I hope he will; still I don't think our own selfish considerations should detain him against his better judgment."

"I am eager to see Cripps's partners," said Claude vacillating. "They may know more about it."

"And solicitors are such trying people," remarked Lady Caroline sympathetically; "one always does want to see them personally, to know what they really mean."

"That's what I feel," said Claude.

"But what on earth has he to consult them about?" demanded the Home Secretary. "Everything will keep – except the golf. Besides, my dear fellow, you are perfectly safe in the hands of Maitland, Hollis, Cripps and Company. A fine steady firm, and yet pushing too. I recollect they were the first solicitors in London –"

"Were!" said his wife significantly.

"To supply us with typewritten briefs, my love. Now there is little else. In such hands, my dear Claude, your interests are quite undramatically safe."

"Still," said Claude, "it's an important matter; and I am, after all, for the moment, the head of –"

"I'll tell you what you are," cried the politician, with a burst of that hot brutality which had formerly made him the wholesome terror of the Junior Bar; "you're a confounded minor Cockney poet! If you want to go back to your putrid midnight oil, go back to it; if you want to get out of the golf, get out of it! I'm off. I shouldn't like to be rude to you, Claude, my boy, and I may be if I remain. No doubt I shall be able to pick up somebody down at the links."

Claude struck his flag.

A minute later, Olivia, from the broad bay window, watched the lank, handsome poet and the sturdy, white-haired statesman hurrying along the Marina arm-in-arm; both in knickerbockers and Norfolk jackets; and each carrying a quiverful of golf-clubs in his outer hand.

The girl was lost in thought.

"Olivia," said a voice behind her, "your father behaved like a brute!"

"I didn't think so; it was all in good part. And it will do him so much good!"

"Do whom?"

"Poor Claude! Of course he is dreadfully cut up."

"Then why did he pretend to be pleased?"

"That was his pluck. He took it splendidly. I never admired him so much!"

Lady Caroline opened her mouth to speak, but shut it again without a word. Her daughter's slight figure was silhouetted against the middle window of the bow; the sun put a golden crown upon the fair young head; yet the head was bent, and the girl's whole attitude one of pity and of thought. Lady Caroline Sellwood rose quietly, and left the room.

That species of low cunning, which was one of her Ladyship's traits, had placed her for the moment in a rather neat dilemma. Claude Lafont had cast poet's eyes at Olivia for months and years; and for weeks and months Olivia's mother had wished there were less poetry and more passion in the composition of that aristocrat. He would not say what nobody else, not even Lady Caroline, could say for him. He was content to dangle and admire; he had called Olivia his "faëry queen," with his lips and with his pen, in private and in print; but he had betrayed no immediate desire to call her his wife. Lady Caroline had recommended him to marry, and he had denounced marriage as "the death of romance." Quite sure in her own mind that she was dealing with none other than the Duke of St. Osmund's, it was her Ladyship who had planned the present small party (which her distinguished husband would call a "foursome") for the Easter Recess. Flatly disbelieving in the existence of the alleged Australian heir, she had seen the merit of engaging Olivia to Claude before the latter assumed his title in the eyes of the world. That the title was his to assume, when he liked, had been the opinion of all the Lafonts, save Claude himself, from the very first; and, when it suited her, Lady Caroline Sellwood was very well pleased to consider herself a Lafont. In point of fact, her mother had borne that illustrious name before her marriage with the impecunious Earl Clennell of Ballycawley; and Lady Caroline was herself a great-granddaughter of the sixth Duke of St. Osmund's.

The sixth Duke (who exerted himself to make the second half of the last century rather wickeder than the first) had two sons, of whom her present Ladyship's grandfather was the younger. The elder became the seventh Duke, and begot the eighth (and most respectable) Duke of St. Osmund's – the aged peer lately deceased. The eighth Duke, again, had but two sons, who both predeceased him. These two sons were, respectively, Claude's father and the unmentionable Marquis of Maske. The Marquis was a man after the heart of his worst ancestor, a fascinating blackguard, neither more nor less. At twenty-four he had raised the temperature of his native air to a degree incompatible with his own safety; and had fled the country never to return. Word of his death was received from Australia in the year 1866. He had died horribly, from thirst in the wilderness, and yet a proper compassion was impossible even after that. For the news was

accompanied by a letter from the dead man's hand – scrawled at his last gasp, and pinned with his knife to the tree under which the body was found – yet composed in a vein of revolting cynicism, and containing further news of the most embarrassing description. The Marquis was leaving behind him – somewhere in Australia – at the moment he really could not say where – a small Viscount Dillamore to inherit ultimately the title and estates. He gave no dates, but said his wife was dead. To the best of his belief, however, the lad was alive; and might be known by the French eagle of the Lafonts, which the father had himself tattooed upon his little chest.

This was all the clue which had been left to Claude, to follow on a bad man's bare word, or to ignore at his own discretion. For reasons best known to himself, the old Duke had taken no steps to discover the little Marquis. Unluckily, however, his late Grace had not been entirely himself for many years before his death; and those reasons had never transpired. Claude, on the other hand, was a man of fastidious temperament, a person of infinite scruples, with a morbid horror of the incorrect. He would spend half the morning deciding between a semicolon and a full stop; and he was consistently conscientious in matters of real moment, as, for example, in that of his marriage. He had been asking himself, for quite a twelve-month, whether he really loved Olivia; he had no intention of asking *her* until he was quite convinced on the point. To such a man there was but one course possible on the old Duke's death. And Claude had taken it with the worst results.

"He has no sympathy for *me*," said Lady Caroline bitterly, as she went upstairs. "He has cut his own throat, and there's an end of it; except that if he thinks he's going to marry any daughter of mine, after this, he is very much mistaken."

It was extremely mortifying all the same; to have prepared the ground so carefully, to have arranged every preliminary for a match which had now to be abandoned altogether; and worse still, to have turned away half the eligible young men in town for the sake of a Duke who was not a Duke at all. Lady Caroline Sellwood had three daughters. The eldest had made a good, solid, military marriage, and enjoyed in India a social position that was not unworthy of her. The second daughter had not done quite so well; still, her husband, the Rev. Francis Freke, was a divine whose birth was better than his attainments, so that there was every chance of seeing his little legs in gaiters before either foot was in his grave. But Olivia was her youngest ("my ewe lamb," Lady Caroline used to call her, although no other kind had graced her fold), and in her mother's opinion she was fitted for a better fate than that which had befallen either of her sisters. Olivia was the prettiest of the three. Her little fair head, "sunning over with curls," as Claude never tired of saying, was made by nature with a self-evident view to strawberry-leaves and twinkling tiaras. And Lady Caroline meant it to wear them yet.

She had done her best to encourage Claude in his inclination to run up to town at once. The situation at the seaside had become charged with danger. Not only did it appear to Lady Caroline that the poet was at last satisfied with the state of his own affections, but she had reason to fear that Claude Lafont would have a better chance with Olivia than would the Duke of St. Osmund's. The child was peculiar. She had read too much, and there was a suspiciously sentimental strain in her. Her acute mother did not imagine her "vulgarly in love" (as she called it) with the æsthetic Claude; but she had heard him tell the girl that "pity from her" was "more dear than that from another"; and it was precisely this pity which Lady Caroline now dreaded as fervently as she would have welcomed it the day before. Her stupid husband had outwitted her in the matter of Claude's departure. Lady Caroline was hardly at the top of the stairs before she had made up the masterly mind which she considered at least a match for her stupid husband's. He would not allow her to get rid of Claude? Very well; nothing simpler. She would get rid of Olivia instead.

The means suggested itself almost as quickly as the end.

Lady Caroline took a little walk to the post-office, and said she had been on the pier. In a couple of hours a telegram arrived from Mrs. Freke, begging Olivia to go to her at once. Lady

Caroline was apparently overwhelmed with surprise. But she despatched her ewe lamb by the next train.

"Olivia, I won both rounds!" called out the Home Secretary, when he strutted in towards evening, pink and beaming. Claude also looked the better and the brighter for his day; but Lady Caroline took the brightness out of him in an instant; and the Home Secretary beamed no more that night.

"It is no use your calling Olivia," said her Ladyship calmly; "by this time she must be a hundred miles away. You needn't look so startled, George. You know the state to which poor Francis reduces himself by the end of Lent, and you know that dear Mary's baby is not thriving as it ought. I shouldn't wonder if he makes *it* fast, too! At all events Mary telegraphed for Olivia this morning, and I let her go. Now it's no use being angry with any of us! With a young baby and a half-starved husband it was a very natural request. There's the telegram on the mantelpiece for you to see for yourself what she says."

CHAPTER II

"HAPPY JACK"

A dilettante in letters, a laggard in love, and a pedant in much of his speech, Claude Lafont was nevertheless possessed of certain graces of the heart and head which entitled him at all events to the kindly consideration of his friends. He had enthusiasm and some soul; he had an open hand and an essentially simple mind. These were the merits of the man. They were less evident than his foibles, which, indeed, continually obscured them. He would have been the better for one really bad fault: but nature had not salted him with a single vice.

Unpopular at Eton, he had found his feet perhaps a little too firmly at Oxford. There his hair had grown long and his views outrageous. Had the old Duke of St. Osmund's been in his right mind at the time, he would certainly have quitted it at the report of some of his grandson's contributions to the university debates. Claude, however, had the courage of his most extravagant opinions, and even at Oxford he was a man whom it was possible to respect. The era of Toynbee Hall and a gentlemanly, kid-gloved Socialism came a little later; there were other and intermediate phases, into which it is unnecessary to enter. Claude came through them all with two things, at least, as good as new: his ready enthusiasm and his excellent heart.

Whether he really did view the new twist in his life with the satisfaction which he professed is an open and immaterial question; all that is certain or important is the fact that he did not permit himself to repine. He was never in better spirits than in the six weeks' interval between the receipt of Mr. Cripps's cable and that gentleman's arrival with the new Duke. Claude divided the time between the proofs of his new volume of poems and conscientious preparations for the proper reception of his noble cousin. He had the mansion in Belgrave Square, which had fallen of late years into disuse, elaborately done up, repapered, and fitted throughout with new hangings and the electric light. He felt it his duty to hand over the house in a cleanly and habitable state; and he was accustomed to work his duty rather hard. He ran down to Maske Towers, the principal family seat, repeatedly, and had certain renovations carried out as far as possible under his own eye. In every direction he did more than he need have done. And so the time passed very busily, quite happily, and with an interest that was kept green to the last by the utter absence of any shred of information concerning the ninth Duke of St. Osmund's.

Claude had even no idea as to whether he was a married man. So he legislated for a wife and family. And his worst visions were of a hulking, genial, sheep-farming Duke, with a tribe of very terrible little Lords and Ladies, duly frightened of their gigantic father, but paying not the slightest attention to the anæmic Duchess who all day scolded them through her freckled nose.

Mr. Cripps's letters continued to arrive by each week's mail; but they were still written with a shake of the head and a growing deprecation of the wild-goose chase in which the lawyer now believed himself to be unworthily engaged. Towards the end of May, however, the letters stopped. The last one was written on the eve of an expedition up the country, on a mere off-chance, to find out more about one John Dillamore, whom Mr. Cripps had heard of as a resident of the Riverina. Claude Lafont knew well what had come of that off-chance. It had turned the tide of his life. But no letter came from the Riverina; the next communication was a telegram from Brindisi, saying they had left the ship and were travelling overland; and the next after that, another telegram stating the hour at which they hoped to land at Dover.

Claude Lafont had just time enough to put on his hat, to stop the hansom for an instant at the house in Belgrave Square, and to catch the 12.0 from Victoria.

It was a lovely day in early June. There was neither a cloud in the sky nor the white crest of a wave out at sea; the one was as serenely blue as the other; and the *Calais-Douvre* rode in with a

high-bred calm and dignity all in key with the occasion. Claude boarded her before he had any right, with a sudden dereliction of his characteristic caution. And there was old Cripps, sunburnt and grim, with a soft felt hat on his head, and a strange spasmodic twitching at the corners of the mouth.

"Here you are!" cried Claude, gripping hands. "Well, where is he?"

The lawyer's lips went in and out, and a rough-looking bystander chuckled audibly.

"One thing quickly," whispered Claude: "is he a married man?"

"No, he isn't."

The bystander laughed outright. Claude favoured him with a haughty glance.

"His servant, I presume?"

"No," said Cripps hoarsely. "I must introduce you. The Duke of St. Osmund's – your kinsman, Mr. Claude Lafont."

Claude felt the painful pressure of a horny fist, and gasped.

"Proud to meet you, mister," said the Duke.

"So delighted to meet and welcome *you*, Duke," said Claude faintly.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit of a larrikin," continued the Duke. "You'd have done as well to leave me where I was – but now I'm here you've got to call me Jack."

"You knew, of course, what would happen sooner or later?" said Claude, with a sickly smile.

"Not me. My colonial oath, I did *not*! Never dreamt of it till I seen *him*" – with a jerk of his wideawake towards Mr. Cripps. It was a very different felt hat from that gentleman's; the crown rose like a sugar-loaf, nine inches from the head; the brim was nearly as many inches wide; and where the felt touched the temples it was stained through and through with ancient perspiration.

"And I can't sight it now!" added his Grace.

"Nevertheless it's true," said Mr. Cripps.

Claude was taking in the matted beard, the peeled nose, and the round shoulders of the ninth Duke. He was a bushman from top to toe.

"What luggage have you?" exclaimed Claude, with a sudden effort. "We must get it ashore."

"This is all," said the Duke, with a grin.

It lay on the deck at their feet: a long cylinder whose outer case was an old blue blanket, very neatly rolled and strapped; an Australian saddle, with enormous knee-pads, black with age; and an extraordinary cage like a rabbit-hutch. The cage was full of cats. The Duke insisted on carrying it ashore himself.

"This *is* the man?" whispered Claude, jealously, to Mr. Cripps.

"The man himself; there's an eagle on his chest as large as life."

"But it might be a coincidence –"

"It might be, but it isn't," replied Cripps shortly. "He's the Duke all right; the papers I shall show you are quite conclusive. I own he doesn't look the part. He's not tractable. He would come as he is. I heaved one old hat overboard; but he had a worse in his swag. However, no one on board knew who he was. I took care of that."

"God bless you, Cripps!" said Claude Lafont.

He had reserved a first-class carriage. The Duke took up half of it with his cat-cage, which he stoutly declined to trust out of his sight. There were still a few minutes before the train would start. Claude and Cripps exchanged sympathetic glances.

"I think we ought to drink the Duke's health," said Claude, who for once felt the need of a stimulant himself.

"I think so too," said Mr. Cripps.

"Then make 'em lock the door," stipulated his Grace. "I wouldn't risk my cats being shook, not for drinks as long as your leg!"

A grinning guard came forward with his key. The Duke "mistered" him, and mentioned where his cats came from as he got out.

"Very kind of you to shout for me," he continued as they filed into the refreshment room; "but why the blazes don't you call me Jack? Happy Jack's my name, that's what they used to call me up the bush. I'm not going to stop being Jack, or happy either, 'cause I'm a Dook; if I did I'd jolly soon sling it. Now, my dear, what are you givin' us? Why don't you let me help myself, like they do up the bush? English fashion, is it? And you call that drop a nobbler, do you, in the old country? Well, well, here's fun!"

The Duke's custodians were not sorry to get him back beside his cats. They were really glad when the train started. The Duke was in high spirits. The whisky had loosened his tongue.

"Like cats, old man?" he inquired of Claude. "Then I hope you'll make friends with mine. They were my only mates, year in, year out, up at the hut. I wasn't going to leave 'em there when they'd stood by me so long; not likely; so here they are. See that black 'un in the corner? I call her Black Maria, and that's her kitten. She went and had a large family at sea, but this poor little beggar's the only one what lived to tell the tale. That great big Tom, he's the father. I don't think much of Tom, but it would have been a shame to leave him behind. No, sir, my favourite's the little tortoise-shell with the game leg. He got cotched in a rabbit trap last shearing-time; he's the most adventurous little cat that ever was, so I call him Livingstone. I've known him explore five miles from the hut, when there wasn't a drop of water or a blade of feed in the paddicks, and yet come back as fat as butter. A little caution, I tell you! Out you come, Livingstone!"

Claude thought he had never seen a more ill-favoured animal. To call it tortoise-shell was to misuse the word. It was simply yellow; it ran on three legs; and its nose had been recently scarified by an enemy's claws.

"No, I'm full up of Tom," pursued the Duke, fondling his pet. "Look what he done on board to Livingstone's nose! I nearly slung him over the side. Poor little puss, then, poor little puss! You may well purr, old toucher; there's a live Lord scratching your head."

"Meaning me?" said Claude genially; there was a kindness in the rugged face, as it bent over the little yellow horror, that appealed to the poet.

"Meaning you, of course."

"But I'm not one."

"You're not? What a darned shame! Why, you ought to be a Dook. You'd make a better one than me!"

The family solicitor was half-hidden behind that morning's *Times*; as Jack spoke, he hid himself entirely. Claude, for his part, saw nothing to laugh at. The Duke's face was earnest. The Duke's eyes were dark and kind. Like Claude himself, he had the long Lafont nose, though sun and wind had peeled it red; and a pair of shaggy brown eyebrows gave strength at all events to the hairy face. Claude was thinking that half-an-hour at Truefitt's, a pot of vaseline, and the best attentions of his own tailors in Maddox Street would make a new man of Happy Jack. Not that his suit was on a par with his abominable wideawake. He could not have worn these clothes in the bush. They were obviously his best; and, as obviously, ready-made.

Happy Jack was meantime apostrophising his pet.

"Ah! but you was with me when that there gentleman found me, wasn't you, Livingstone? You should tell the other gentleman about that. We never thought we was a Dook, did we? We thought ourselves a blooming ordinary common man. My colonial oath, and so we are! But you recollect that last bu'st of ours, Livingstone? I mean the time we went to knock down the thirty-one pound cheque what never got knocked down properly at all. We had a rare thirst on us –"

Mr. Cripps in his corner smacked down the *Times* on his knees.

"Look there!" he cried. "Did ever you see such grass as that, Jack? You've nothing like it in New South Wales. I declare it does my old heart good to see an honest green field again!"

Jack looked out for an instant only.

"Ten sheep to the acre," said he. "Wonderful, isn't it, Livingstone? And you an' me used to ten acres to the sheep! But we were talking about that last little spree; you want your Uncle Claude to hear all about it, I see you do; you're not the cat to make yourself out better than what you are; not you, Livingstone! Well, as I was saying – "

"Those red-tiled roofs are simply charming!" exclaimed the solicitor.

"A perfect poem," said Claude.

"And that May-tree in full bloom!"

"A living lyric," said Claude.

It was really apple-blossom.

"And you," cried the Duke to his cat, "you're a comic song, that's what *you* are! Tell 'em you won't be talked down, Livingstone. Tell this gentleman he's got to hear the worst. Tell him that when the other gentleman found us" – the solicitor raised his *Times* with a shrug – "one of us was drunk, drunk, drunk; and the other was watching over him – and the other was my little cat!"

"You're joking, of course?" said Claude, with a flush.

"Not me, mister. That's a fact. You see, it was like this – "

"Thanks," said Claude hastily; "but I'd far rather not know."

"Why not, old toucher?"

"It would hurt me," said Claude, with a shudder.

"Hurt you! Hear that, Livingstone? It would hurt him to hear how we knocked down our last little cheque! That's the best one I've heard since I left the ship!"

"Nevertheless it's the case."

"And do you mean to tell me you were never like that yourself?"

"Never in my life."

"Well, shoot me dead!" whispered the Duke in his amazement.

"It ought not to surprise you," said Claude, in a tone that set the *Times* shaking in the far corner of the carriage.

"It does, though. I can't help it. You're the first I've ever met that could say as much."

"Pray let us drop the subject. I prefer to hear no more. You pain me more than I can say!"

Claude's flush had deepened; his supersensitive soul was indeed scandalised, and so visibly that an answering flush showed upon the Duke's mahogany features, like an extra coat of polish.

"I pain you!" he echoed, dropping his cat. "I'm very sorry then. I am so! I had no intention of doing any such thing. All I wanted was to fly my true flag at once, like, and have done with it. And I've pained you; and you bet I'll go on paining you all the time! How can I help it? I'm not what us back-blockers call a parlour-man, though I may be a Dook; but neither the one nor the other is my fault. You should have let me be in the bush. I was all right there – all right with my hut and my cats. I'd never known anything better. I never knew who I was. What did it matter if I knocked down my cheque when I got full up of the cats and the hut? Nobody thinks anything of that up the bush. The boss used always to take me on again; some day I'll tell you about my old boss; he was the best friend ever I had. A real gentleman, who thought no worse of you so long's it only happened now and then. But see here! It shall never happen again. It didn't matter in the boundary rider, but p'r'aps it might in the Dook. Anyhow I'm strict T T from this moment; that whisky at Dover shall be my last. And I'm darned sorry I pained you, and – and dash it, here's my fist on it for good and all!"

It is difficult to say which hand wrung the harder. Claude was not pleased with himself; the conscious lack of some quality, which the other possessed, was afflicting him with a novel and entirely unexpected sense of inferiority. He was as yet unsure what the missing quality was; he hardly suspected it of being a virtue; but it was new to Claude to have these feelings at all.

He said not another word upon the embarrassing subject, but fell presently into a train of thought that kept him silent until they steamed into Victoria. There the conquering Cripps was met

by his wife and daughters; but Claude managed to get a few more words with him as they were waiting to have the baggage passed.

"I like him," said Claude.

"So do I," was the reply, "and I know him well."

"I like his honesty."

"He is honesty itself. I did my best just now to keep him from giving himself away – but that was his deliberate game. Mark you, what he insisted on telling you was quite true; but on the whole he has behaved excellently ever since."

"Well, as long as he doesn't confess his sins to everybody he meets!"

"No fear of that; he looks on you as still the head of the family, with a sort of *ex officio* right to know the worst. His own position he doesn't realise a bit. Yet some day I expect to see him at least as fit to occupy it as one or two others; and you are the man to make him so. You will only require two things."

The great doors opened inwards, and the travellers surged in to claim their luggage, with Mr. Cripps at their head. Claude caught him by the elbow as he was pointing out his trunks.

"Those two things?" said he.

"Yes, those two, with my initials on each."

"No, but the two things that I shall need?"

"Oh, those! Plenty of patience, and plenty of time."

CHAPTER III

A CHANCE LOST

It was the pink of the evening when the cousins drove off in a four-wheeler with the cats on top. Claude had been in many minds about their destination, until the Duke had asked him to recommend an hotel. At that he had hesitated a little, and finally pitched upon the First Avenue. A variety of feelings guided his choice, chief among them being a vague impression that his wild kinsman would provoke less attention in Holborn than in Northumberland Avenue. To Holborn, at all events, they were now on their way.

Claude sat far back in the cab; he felt thankful it was not a hansom. In the Mall they met a string of them, taking cloaked women and white-breasted men out to dinner. Claude saw one or two faces he knew, but was himself unseen. He saw them stare and smile at the tanned and bearded visage beneath that villainous wideawake, which was thrust from one window to the other with the eager and unrestrained excitement of a child. He felt ashamed of poor Jack. He was sincerely ashamed of this very feeling.

"What streets!" whispered the Duke in an awestruck whisper. "We've nothing like 'em in Melbourne. They'd knock spots off Sydney. I've been in both."

Claude had a sudden thought. "For you," he said, "these streets should have a special interest."

"How's that?"

"Well, many of them belong to you."

"WHAT?"

"You are the ground landlord of some of the streets and squares we have already passed."

The brown beard had fallen in dismay; now, however, a mouthful of good teeth showed themselves in a frankly incredulous grin.

"What are you givin' us?" laughed Jack. "I see, you think you've got a loan of a new chum! Well, so you have. Go ahead!"

"Not if you don't choose to believe me," replied Claude stiffly. "I meant what I said; I usually do. The property has been in our family for hundreds of years."

"And now it's mine?"

"And now it's yours."

The Duke of St. Osmund's took off his monstrous wideawake, and passed the back of his hairy hand across his forehead. The gesture was eloquent of a mind appalled.

"Have I no homestead on my own run?" he inquired at length.

"You have several," said Claude, smiling; but he also hesitated.

"Several in London?" cried the Duke, aghast again.

"No – only one in town."

"That's better! I say, though, why aren't we going there?"

"Well, the fact is, they're not quite ready for you; I mean the servants. They – we were all rather rushed, you know, and they don't expect you to-night. Do you mind?"

Claude had stated but one fact of many. That morning, when he stopped his hansom at the house, he had told the servants not to expect his Grace until he telegraphed. After seeing the Duke, he had resolved not to telegraph at all; and certainly not to install him in his own house, as he was, without consulting other members of the family. He still considered that decision justified. Nevertheless, the Duke's reply came as a great relief.

"No, I'm just as glad," said Jack contentedly. His contentment was only comparative, however. The first dim conception of his greatness had strangely dashed him; he was no longer the man that he had been in the train.

An athlete in a frayed frock-coat, and no shirt, was sprinting behind the cab with the customary intent; it was a glimpse of him, as they turned a corner, that slew the oppressed Duke, and brought Happy Jack back to life.

"Stop the cab!" he roared; "there's a man on the track of my cats!"

"Nonsense, my dear fellow; it's only a person who'll want sixpence for not helping with the luggage."

"Are you sure?" asked Jack suspiciously. "How do you know he isn't a professional cat-stealer? I must ask the cabman if they are all right!" He did so, and was reassured.

"We're almost at the hotel now," said Claude, with misgivings; he was bitterly anticipating the sensation to be caused there by the arrival of such a Duke of St. Osmund's, and wondering whether it would be of any use suggesting a further period of *incognito*.

"Nearly there, are we? Then see here," said Jack, "I've got something to insist on. I mean to have my way about one matter."

Claude groaned inwardly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'll tell you straight. I'm not going to do the Dook in this hotel. I'm plain Jack Dillamore, or I don't go in."

The delight of this deliverance nearly overcame the poet.

"I think you're wise," was all he trusted himself to say. "I should be inclined to take the same course were I in your place. You will escape a great deal of the sort of adulation which turneth the soul sick. And for one night, at all events, you will be able, as an alien outsider, to form an unprejudiced opinion of our unlovely metropolis."

In the bright light of his ineffable relief, Claude's little mannerisms stood out once more, like shadows when the sun shines fitfully; but it was a transient gleam. The arrival at the hotel was still embarrassing enough. The wideawake attracted attention. The attention was neither of a flattering character in itself nor otherwise desirable from any point of view. It made Claude miserable. There was also trouble about the cats.

Jack insisted on having them with him in his room. The management demurred. Jack threatened to go elsewhere. The management raised no objection; but Claude did. He handed them his card, and this settled the matter. There is but one race of Lafonts in England. So Jack had his way. A room was taken; the cats were put into it; milk was set before them; and Jack left the hotel in Claude's company, with the key of that room in his pocket.

Claude would have taken him to his club, but for both their sakes he did not dare. Yet he was as anxious as ever to show every hospitality to the Duke. Accordingly he had refused Jack's invitation to dine with him in the hotel, and was taking him across to the Holborn instead.

The dinner went wonderfully. Jack was delighted with the music, with the electric lights, with the marble pillars, with the gilded balconies, with the dinner itself, in fact with everything. There was but one item which did not appeal to him: he stoutly refused to drink a drop of wine.

"A promise is a promise," said he. "I gave you my colonial in the train, and I mean to keep it; for a bit, at all events."

Claude protested and tempted him in vain. Jack called for a lemon-squash, and turned his wine-glasses upside down. He revenged himself, however, upon the viands.

"Which *entrée*, please, sir?" said the waiter.

"Both!" cried Jack. "You may go on, mister, till I tell you to stop!"

After dinner the cousins went aloft, and Claude took out his cigarette case and ordered cigars for the Duke. He could not smoke them himself, but neither, it appeared, could Jack. *He* produced a cutty-pipe, black and foul with age, and a cake of tobacco like a piece of shoe-leather, which he began paring with his knife. Claude had soon to sit farther away from him.

Jack did not fancy a theatre; he was strongly in favour of a quiet evening and a long talk; and it was he who proposed that they should return, for this purpose, to the First Avenue. No sooner were they comfortably settled in the hotel smoking-room, however, than the Duke announced that he must run upstairs and see to his cats. And he came down no more that night.

Claude waited patiently for twenty minutes. Then he began a note to Lady Caroline Sellwood. Then he remembered that he could, if he liked, see Lady Caroline that night. It was merely a question of driving over to his rooms in St. James's and putting himself into evening dress. On the whole, this seemed worth doing. Claude therefore followed Jack upstairs after an interval of half-an-hour.

The Duke's rooms were on the first floor. Claude surprised a group of first-floor servants laughing and whispering in the corridor. The little that he heard as he passed made him hot all over. The exact words were:

"Never see such a man in my life." "Nor me, my dear!" "And yet they call this 'ere a decent 'otel!"

Claude had no doubt in his own mind as to whom they were talking about. Already the Duke inspired him with a sort of second-self-consciousness. Prepared for anything, he hastened to the room and nervously knocked at the door.

"Come in!" cried Jack's voice.

The door was unlocked; as Claude opened it the heat of the room fairly staggered him. It was a sufficiently warm summer night, yet an enormous fire was burning in the grate.

"My *dear* fellow!" panted Claude.

Jack was in his trousers and shirt; the sleeves were rolled up over his brawny arms; the open front revealed an estuary of hairy chest; and it was plain at a glance that the Duke was perspiring at every pore.

"It's all right," he said. "It's for the cats."

"The cats!" said Claude. They were lying round about the fire.

"Yes, poor devils! They had a fire every day in the hut, summer and winter. They never had a single one at sea. They like to sleep by it – they always did – all but Livingstone. He sleeps with me when he isn't on the loose."

"But you'll never be able to sleep in an atmosphere like this!"

Jack was cutting up a pipeful of his black tobacco.

"Well, it *is* warm," he admitted. "And now you mention it, I may find it a job to get asleep; but the cats like it, anyhow!" And he swore at them affectionately as he lit his pipe.

"Did you forget you'd left me downstairs?" asked Claude.

"Clean! I apologise. I took this idea into my head, and I could think of nothing else."

"May we have another window open? Thank you. I'll smoke one cigarette; then I must be off."

"Where to?"

"My chambers – to dress."

"To *undress*, you mean!"

"No, to dress. I've got to go out to a – to a party. I had almost forgotten about it. The truth is, I want to see Lady Caroline Sellwood, who, although not a near relation, is about the only woman in London with our blood in her veins. She will want to see you. What's the matter?"

Jack's pipe had gone out in his hand; and there he stood, a pillar of perspiring bewilderment.

"A party!" he murmured. "At this time o' night!"

Claude laughed.

"It's not ten o'clock yet; if I'm there before half-past eleven I shall be too early."

"I give you best," said Jack, shaking his head, and putting another light to his pipe. "It licks *me*! Who's the madman who gives parties in the middle of the night?"

"My dear fellow, everybody does! In this case it's a woman: the Countess of Darlingford."

"A live Countess!"

"Well, but you're a live Duke."

"But – I'm – a live – Dook!"

Jack repeated the words as though the fact had momentarily escaped him. His pipe went out again. This time he made no attempt to relight it, but stood staring at Claude with his bare brown arms akimbo, and much trouble in his rugged, honest face.

"You can't get out of it," laughed Claude.

"I can!" he cried. "I mean to get out of it! I'm not the man for the billet. I wasn't dragged up to it. And I don't want it! I shall only make a darned ass of myself and everybody else mixed up with me. I may be the man by birth, but I'm not the man by anything else; and look here, I want to back out of it while there's time; and you're the very man to help me. I wasn't dragged up to it – but you were. I'm not the man for the billet – but you are. The very man! You go to parties in the middle of the night, and you think nothing of 'em. They'd be the death of Happy Jack! The whole thing turns me sick with funk – the life, the money, the responsibility. I never got a sight of it till to-day; and now I don't want it at any price. You'd have got it if it hadn't been for me; so take it now – for God's sake, take it now! If it's mine, it's mine to give. I give it to you! Claude, old toucher, be the Dook yourself. Let me and the cats clear back to the bush!"

The poet had listened with amazement, with amusement, with compassion and concern. He now shook his head.

"You ask an impossibility. Without going into the thing, take my word for it that what you propose is utterly and hopelessly out of the question."

"Couldn't I disappear?" said Jack eagerly. "Couldn't I do a bolt in the night? It's a big chance for you; surely you won't lose it by refusing to help me clear out?"

Claude again shook his head.

"In a week's time you will be laughing at what you are saying now. You are one of the richest men in England; everything that money can buy you can have. You own some of the loveliest seats in the whole country; wait till I have shown you Maske Towers! You won't want to clear out then. You won't ask me to be the Duke again!"

He had purposely dwelt upon those material allurements which the bushman's mind would most readily grasp. And it was obvious that his arguments had hit the target, although not, perhaps, the bull's-eye.

"Anyhow," said Jack doggedly, "it's an offer! And I repeat it. What's more, I mean it too!"

"Then I decline it," returned Claude, to humour him; "and there's an end of the matter. Look here, though. One thing I promise. If you like, I'll see you through!"

"You will?"

"I will with all my heart."

"And you're quite sure you won't take on the whole show yourself?"

"Quite sure," said Claude, smiling.

"Still, you'll tell me what to do? You'll tell me what not to do? You'll show me the ropes? You'll have hold of my sleeve?"

"I'll do all that; at least, I'll do all I can. It may not be much. Still I'll do it."

Jack held out a hot, damp hand; yet, just then, he seemed to be perspiring most freely under the eyes.

"You're a good sort, Claudy!" said he hoarsely.

"Good-night, old fellow," said Claude Lafont.

CHAPTER IV

NOT IN THE PROGRAMME

Lady Caroline Sellwood's incomparable Wednesdays were so salient a feature of those seasons during which her husband was in office, and her town house in St. James's Square, that their standard is still quoted as the ideal of its kind. These afternoons were never dull. Lady Caroline cast a broad net, and her average draught included representatives of every decent section of the community. But she also possessed some secret recipe, the envy and the despair of other professional hostesses, and in her rooms there was never an undue preponderance of any one social ingredient. Every class – above a certain line, not drawn too high – was represented; none was over done; nor was the mistake made of "packing" the assembly with interesting people. The very necessary complement of the merely interested was never wanting. One met beauty as well as brains; wealth as well as wit; and quite as many colourless nonentities as notorieties of every hue. The proportion was always perfect, but not more so than the general good-temper of the guests. They foregathered like long-lost brothers and sisters: the demagogue and the divine; the judge and the junior; the oldest lady and the newest woman; the amateur playwright and the actor-manager who had lost his play; the minor novelist and the young lady who had never heard of him; and my Lords and Ladies (whose carriages half-filled the Square) with the very least of these. It was wonderful to see them together; it was a solemn thought, but yet a fact, that their heavenly behaviour was due simply and entirely to the administrative genius of Lady Caroline Sellwood.

The Home Secretary hated the Wednesdays; he was the one person who did; and *he* only hated them because they *were* Wednesdays – and from the period of his elderly infatuation for golf. It was his great day for a round; and Lady Caroline had to make his excuses every week when it was fine. This was another thing which her Ladyship did beautifully. She would say, with a voice full of sympathy, equally divided between those mutual losers, her guest and her husband, that poor dear George had to address such and such a tiresome deputation; when, as a matter of fact, he was "addressing" his golf-hall on Wimbledon Common, and enjoying himself exceedingly. Now, among other Wednesdays, the Home Secretary was down at Wimbledon (with a prominent member of the Opposition) on the afternoon following the arrival in London of the ninth Duke of St. Osmund's; and Mr. Sellwood never knew whether to pity his wife, or to congratulate himself, on his absence from her side on that occasion.

One of their constant ornaments, Claude Lafont, had been forced to eschew these Wednesdays of late weeks. Lady Caroline Sellwood had never been quite the same to him since the Easter Recess. She had treated him from that time with a studied coolness quite inexplicable to his simple mind; and finally, at Lady Darlingford's, she had been positively rude. Claude, of course, had gone there expressly to prepare Lady Caroline for the new Duke. This he conceived to be his immediate duty, and he attempted to perform it, in the kindest spirit imaginable, with all the tact at his command. Lady Caroline declined to hear him out. She chose to put a sinister construction upon his well-meant words, and to interrupt them with the announcement that she intended, with Claude's permission, to judge the Duke for herself. Was he married? Ha! then where was he to be found? Claude told her, was coldly thanked, and went home to writhe all that Tuesday night under the mortification of his kinswoman's snub.

Yet, on the Wednesday afternoon, Claude Lafont not only went to the Sellwoods' as though nothing had happened, but he was there before the time. And Lady Caroline was not only amazed, but (for the first time since Easter) really pleased to see him: for already she had been given cause to regret her insolent disregard of him overnight at Lady Darlingford's. She was even composing an apology when the whiteness of Claude's face brought her thoughts to a standstill.

"Have you seen him?" he cried, as they met.

"The Duke?"

"Yes – haven't you seen him this morning?"

"No, indeed! Haven't you?"

Claude sat down with a groan, shaking his head, and never seeing the glittering, plump, outstretched hand.

"Haven't you?" repeated Lady Caroline, sitting down herself.

"Not this morning. I made sure he would come here!"

"So he ought to have done. I asked him to lunch. The note was written and posted the instant we came in from the Darlingfords'. Claude, I wasn't nice to you there! Can you forgive me? I thought you were prejudiced. My dreadful temper rose in arms on the side of the absent man; it always was my great weakness rightly or wrongly to take the part of those who aren't there to stick up for themselves!"

Her great weakness was of quite another character, but Claude bowed. He was barely listening.

"I've lost him," he said, looking at Lady Caroline, with a rolling eye. "He's disappeared."

"Never!"

"This morning," said Claude. "I did so hope he was here!"

"He sent no answer, not one word, and he never came. Who saw him last?"

"The hotel people, early this morning. It seems he ordered a horse for seven o'clock, shortly after I left him last night. So they got him one, and off he went before breakfast in the flannel collar and the outrageous bush wideawake in which he landed. And he's never come back."

A change came over Lady Caroline Sellwood. She drew her chair a little nearer, and she favoured Claude Lafont with a kindlier glance than he had had from her since Easter.

"Something may have happened," whispered Lady Caroline hopefully.

"That's just it. Something *must* have happened."

"But something dreadful! Only last season there was a man killed in the Row! Was he – a *very* rough diamond, Claude?"

"Very."

Lady Caroline sighed complacently.

"But you can't help liking him," hastily added Claude, "and I hope to goodness nothing serious is the matter!"

"Of course, so do I. That goes without saying."

"Nor is he at all a likely man to be thrown. He has lived his life in the saddle. By the way, he brought his own old bush-saddle with him, and it appears that he insisted on riding out in that too."

"You see, Claude, it's a pity you didn't leave him in the bush; he's evidently devoted to it still."

"He is – that's the trouble; he has already spoken of bolting back there. My fear is that he may even now be suiting the action to the word."

"Don't tell me that," said Lady Caroline, whose head was still full of her first theory.

"It's what I fear; he's just the sort of fellow to go back by the first boat, if the panic took him. He showed signs of a panic last night. You see, he's only just beginning to realise what his position here will mean. And it frightens him; it may have frightened him out of our sight once and for all."

Lady Caroline shook her head.

"My fear is that he has broken his neck! And if he has, depend upon it, sad as it would be, it would still be for the best. That's what I always say: everything is for the best," repeated Lady Caroline, pensively gazing at Claude's handsome head. "However," she added, as the door opened, "here's Olivia; go and ask her what she thinks. *I* am prepared for the worst. And pray stop, dear Claude, and let us talk the matter over after the others have gone. We may *know* the worst by that time. And we have seen nothing of you this season!"

Olivia looked charming. She was also kind to Claude. But she entirely declined to embrace her mother's dark view of the Duke's disappearance. On the other hand, she was inconveniently inquisitive about his looks and personality, and Claude had to say many words for his cousin before he could get in one for himself. However, he did at length contrive to speak of his new volume of poems. It was just out. He was having a copy of the exceedingly limited large-paper edition specially bound in vellum for Olivia's acceptance. Olivia seemed pleased, and apart from his anxiety Claude had not felt so happy for weeks. They were allowed to talk to each other until the rooms began to fill.

It was a very good Wednesday; but then the season was at its height. The gathering comprised the usual measure of interesting and interested persons, and the former had made their names upon as many different fields as ever. Claude had a chat with his friend, Edmund Stubbs, a young man with an unhealthy skin and a vague reputation for immense cleverness. They spoke of the poems. Stubbs expressed a wish to see the large-paper edition, which was not yet for sale, as did Ivor Llewellyn, the impressionist artist, who was responsible for the "decorations" in most volumes of contemporary minor verse, Claude's included. Claude was injudicious enough to invite both men to his rooms that night. The Impressionist was the most remarkable-looking of all Lady Caroline's guests. He wore a curled fringe and a flowing tie, and pince-nez attached to his person by a broad black ribbon. His pale face was prematurely drawn, and he showed his gums in a deathly grin at the many hard things which Stubbs muttered at the expense of all present whom he knew by sight. Claude had a high opinion of both these men, but for once he was scarcely in tune for their talk, which was ever at a sort of artistic-intellectual concert-pitch. The Duke was to be forgotten in the society of Olivia only. Claude therefore edged away, trod on the skirts of a titled divorcée, got jammed between an Irish member and a composer of comic songs, and was finally engaged in conversation by the aged police magistrate, Sir Joseph Todd.

Sir Joseph had lowered his elephantine form into a chair beside the tea-table, where he sat, with his great cane between his enormous legs, munching cake like a school-boy and winking at his friends. He winked at Claude. The magistrate had been a journalist, and a scandalous Bohemian, so he said, in his young days; he had given Claude introductions and advice when the latter took to his pen. He, also, inquired after the new book, but rather grimly, and expressed himself with the rough edge of his tongue on the subject of modern "poets" and "poetry": the inverted commas were in his voice.

"You young spring poets," said he, "are too tender by half; you're all white meat together. You may say that's no reason why I should have my knife in you. Why didn't you say it? A bad joke would be a positive treat from you precious young fellows of to-day. And you give us bad lyrics instead, in limited editions; that's the way it takes you now."

Claude laughed; he was absurdly good-humoured under hostile criticism, a quality of which some of his literary friends were apt to take advantage. On this occasion, however, his unconcern was partly due to inattention. While listening to his old friend he was thinking still of the Duke.

"I'm sorry you would be a poet, Claude," the magistrate continued. "The price of poets has gone down since my day. And you'd have done so much better in the House – by which, of course, I mean the House we all thought you were bound for. Has he – has he turned up yet?"

"Oh yes; he's in England," replied Claude, with discretion.

Sir Joseph pricked his ears, but curbed his tongue. Of all the questions that gathered on his lips, only one was admissible, even in so old a friend as himself.

"A family man?"

"No; a bachelor."

"Capital! We shall see some fun, eh?" chuckled Sir Joseph, gobbling the last of his last slice.

"What a quarry – what a prize! I was reminded of him only this morning, Claude. I had an Australian

up before me – a most astounding fellow! An escaped bush-ranger, I should call him; looked as if he'd been cut straight out of a penny dreadful; never saw such a man in my life. However – "

Claude was not listening; his preoccupation was this time palpable. The mouth of him was open, and his eyes were fixed; the police magistrate followed their lead, with double eye-glasses in thick gold frames; and then *his* mouth opened too.

Her guests were making way for Lady Caroline Sellwood, who was leading towards the tea-table, by his horny hand, none other than the ninth Duke of St. Osmund's himself. Her Ladyship's face was radiant with smiles; yet the Duke was just as he had been the day before, as unkempt, as undressed (his Crimean shirt had a flannel collar, but no tie), as round-shouldered; with his nose and ears still flayed by the sun; and the notorious wideawake tucked under his arm.

"He has come straight from the bush," her Ladyship informed everybody (as though she meant some shrub in the Square garden), "and just as he is. I call it so sweet of him! You know you'll never look so picturesque again, my dear Duke!"

Olivia followed with the best expression her frank face could muster. Claude took his cousin's hand in a sudden hush.

"Where in the world have you been?" broke from him before them all.

"Been? I've been run in," replied the Duke, with a smack of his bearded grinning lips.

"Tea or coffee, Duke?" said Lady Caroline, all smiling tolerance. "Tea? A cup of tea for the Duke of St. Osmund's. And *where* do you say you have been?"

"Locked up!" said his Grace. "In choky, if you like it better!"

Lady Caroline herself led the laugh. The situation was indeed worthy of her finely tempered steel, her consummate tact, her instinctive dexterity. Many a grander dame would have essayed to quell that incriminating tongue. Not so Lady Caroline Sellwood. She took her Australian wild bull very boldly by the horns.

"I do believe," she cried, "that you are what we have all of us been looking for – in real life – all our days. I do believe you are the shocking Duke of those dreadful melodramas in the flesh at last! What was your crime? Ah! I've no doubt you cannot tell us!"

"Can I not?" cried the Duke, as Claude stopped him, unobserved, from pouring his tea into the saucer. "I'll tell you all about it, and perhaps you'll show me where the crime comes in, for I'm bothered if I see it yet. All I did was to have a gallop along one of your streets; I don't even know which street it was; but there's a round clearing at one end, then a curve, and then another clearing at the far end."

"Regent Street," murmured Claude.

"That's the name. Well, it was quite early, there was hardly anybody about, so I thought surely to goodness there could be no harm in a gallop; and I had one from clearing to clearing. Blowed if they didn't run me in for that! They kept me locked up all the morning. Then they took me before a fat old joker who did nothing much but wink. That old joker, though, he let me off, so I've nothing agen' *him*. He's a white man, he is. So here I am at last, having got your invitation to lunch, ma'am, just half-an-hour ago."

Sir Joseph Todd had been making fruitless efforts to rise, unaided, from his chair; he now caught Claude's arm, and simultaneously, the eye of the Duke.

"Jumping Moses!" roared Jack; "why, there he is! I beg your pardon, mister; but who'd have thought of finding *you* here?"

"This is pleasing," muttered Edmund Stubbs, in the background, to his friend the Impressionist. "I've seen the lion and the lamb lie down here together before to-day. But nothing like this!"

The Impressionist whipped out a pencil and bared a shirt-cuff. No one saw him. All eyes were upon the Duke and the magistrate, who were shaking hands.

"You have paid me a valuable compliment," croaked Sir Joseph gayly. "Of course I winked! Hadn't I my Lord Duke's little peccadillo to wink at?"

And he bowed himself away under cover of his joke, which also helped Lady Caroline enormously. The Duke mentioned the name by which he would go down to posterity on a metropolitan charge-sheet. Most people resumed their conversation. A few still laughed. And the less seriously the whole matter was taken, the better, of course, for all concerned, particularly the Duke. Olivia had him in hand now. And her mother found time to exchange a few words with Claude Lafont.

"A dear fellow, is he not? So natural! Such an example in that way to us all! How many of us would carry ourselves as well in – in our bush garments?" speculated her Ladyship, for the benefit of more ears than Claude's. Then her voice sank and trembled. "Take him away, Claude," she gasped below her breath. "Take him away!"

"I intend to," he whispered, nodding, "when I get the chance."

"But not only from here – from town as well. Carry him off to the Towers! And when you get him there, for heaven's sake keep him there, and take him in hand, and we will all come down in August to see what you have done."

"I'm quite agreeable, of course; but what if he isn't?"

"He will be. *You* can do what you like with him. I have discovered that already; he asked at once if you were here, and said how he liked you. Claude, you are so clever and so good! If any one can make him presentable, it is you!" She was wringing her white hands whiter yet.

"I'll do my best, for all our sakes. I must say I like my material."

"Oh, he's a dear fellow!" cried Lady Caroline, dropping her hands and uplifting her voice once more. "So original – in nothing more than in his moral courage – his superiority to mere conventional appearances! *That* is a lesson –"

Lady Caroline stopped with a little scream. In common with others, she had heard the high, shrill mewling of a kitten; but cats were a special aversion of her Ladyship's.

"What was that?" she cried, tugging instinctively at her skirts.

"Meow!" went the shrill small voice again; and all eyes fastened upon the Duke of St. Osmund's, whose ready-made coat-tails were moving like a bag of ferrets.

The Duke burst into a hearty laugh, and diving in his coat-tail pocket, produced the offending kitten in his great fist. Lady Caroline Sellwood took a step backward; and because she did not lead it, there was no laugh this time from her guests; and because there was no laugh but his own, the Duke looked consciously awkward for the first time. In fact, it was the worst moment yet; the next, however, Olivia's pink palms were stretched out for the kitten, and Olivia's laughing voice was making the sweetest music that ever had gladdened the heart of the Duke.

"The little darling!" cried the girl with genuine delight. "Let me have it, do!"

He gave it to her without a word, but with eyes that clung as fast to her face as the tiny claws did to her dress. Olivia's attention was all for the kitten; she was serenely unconscious of that devouring gaze; but Claude saw it, and winced. And Lady Caroline saw it too.

"Poor mite!" pursued Olivia, stroking the bunch of black fur with a cheek as soft. "What a shame to keep it smothered up in a stuffy pocket! Are you fond of cats?" she asked the Duke.

"Am I not! They were my only mates up the bush. I brought over three besides the kitten."

"You brought them from the bush?"

"I did so!"

Olivia looked at him; his eyes had never left her; she dropped hers, and caressed the kitten.

"I put that one in my pocket," continued the Duke, "because I learned Livingstone to ride in front of me when he was just such another little 'un. But he'd done a bolt in the night; I found him just now with his three working paws black with your London soot; but he wasn't there when I got up, so I took the youngster. P'r'aps it wasn't over kind. It won't happen again. He's yours!"

"The kitten?"

"Why, certainly."

"To keep?"

"If you will. I'd be proud!"

"Then *I* am proud. And I'll try to be as kind to it as you would have been."

"You're uncommon kind to me," remarked the Duke irrelevantly. "So are you all," he added, in a ringing voice, as he drew himself up to his last inch, and for once stood clear of the medium height. "I never knew that there were so many of you here, or I'd have kept away. I'm just as I stepped off of the ship. I went aboard pretty much as I left the bush; if you'll make allowances for me this time, it sha'n't happen again. You don't catch me twice in a rig like this! Meanwhile, it's very kind of you all not to laugh at a fellow. I'm much obliged to you. I am so. And I hope we shall know each other better before long!"

Claude was not ashamed of him then. There was no truer dignity beneath the ruffles and periwigs of their ancestors in the Maske picture-gallery than that of the rude, blunt fellow who could face modestly and yet kindly a whole roomful of well-dressed Londoners. It did not desert him as he shook hands with Lady Caroline and Olivia. In another moment the Duke was gone, and of his own accord, before he had been twenty minutes in the house. And what remained of that Wednesday afternoon fell flat and stale – always excepting the little formula with which Lady Caroline Sellwood sped her parting guests.

"Poor fellow," it ran, "he has roughed it so dreadfully in that horrible bush! You won't know him the next time you see him. Yes, I assure you, he went straight on board at that end and came straight to us at this! Not a day for anything in Melbourne or here. Actually not one day! I thought it so dear of him to come as he was. Didn't you?"

CHAPTER V WITH THE ELECT

The ragged beard had been trimmed to a point; the uncouth hair had been cut, shampooed, and invested with a subtle, inoffensive aroma; and a twenty-five-shilling Lincoln and Bennett crowned all without palpable incongruity. The brown, chapped neck, on the other hand, did look browner and rougher than before in the cold clutch of a gleaming stand-up collar. And a like contrast was observable between the ample cuffs of a brand-new shirt, and the Duke's hands, on whose hirsute backs the yellow freckles now stood out like half-sovereigns. Jack drew the line at gloves. On the whole, however, his docility had passed all praise; he even consented to burden himself with a most superfluous Inverness cape, all for the better concealment of the ready-made suit. In fine, a few hours had made quite a painfully new man of him; yet perhaps the only real loss was that of his good spirits; and these he had left, not in any of the shops to which Claude had taken him before dinner, but, since then, in his own house in Belgrave Square.

Claude had shown him over it between nine and ten; they were now arm-in-arm on their way from this errand, and the street-lamps shone indifferently on the Duke's dejection and on Claude's relief. He had threatened instant occupation of his own town-house; he had conceived nightmare hospitalities towards all and sundry; and had stuck to his guns against argument with an obstinacy which made Claude's hair stand on end. Now the Duke had less to say. He had seen his house. The empty, echoing, inhospitable rooms, with perhaps a handful of electric lights freezing out of the darkness as they entered, had struck a chill to his genial heart. And Claude knew it as he led the way to his own cosy chambers; but was reminded of another thing as he approached them, and became himself, on the spot, a different man.

He had forgotten the two friends he had invited to come in for a private view of the large-paper edition. He was reminded of them by seeing from the street his open window filled with light; and his manner had entirely altered when he detained the Duke below, and sought with elaborate phrases to impress him beforehand with the transcendent merits of the couple whom he was about to meet. Jack promptly offered to go away. He had never heard tell of Impressionism, and artists were not in his line. What about the other joker? What did *he* do?

"Nothing, my dear fellow; he's far too good a man to *do* things," explained Claude, whose changed speech inclined the other to flight quite as much as his accounts of the men upstairs. "The really delicate brains – the most highly sensitised souls – seldom spend themselves upon mere creative work. They look on, and possibly criticise – that is, when they meet with aught worthy their criticism. My friend, Edmund Stubbs, is such an one. He has a sensitised soul, if you like! His artistic standard is too high, he is too true to his ideals, to produce the imperfect. He is full of ideas; but they are too big for brush, pen, or chisel to express them. On the other hand, he's a very fountain of inspiration, tempered by critical restraint, to many a man whose name (as my own) is possibly a household word in Clapham, where poor Edmund's is unknown. Not that I should pity him on that score; he has a holy scorn for what himself would call a 'suburban popularity'; and, indeed, I am not with him in his views as to the indignity of fame generally. But there, he is a bright particular star who is content to shine for the favoured few who have the privilege of calling him their friend."

"You do talk like a book, and no error!" said the Duke. "I haven't ever heard you gas on like that before."

The bright particular star was discovered in Claude's easiest chair, with the precious volume in one hand, and a tall glass, nearly empty, in the other; the Impressionist was in the act of replacing the stopper in the whisky-decanter; and Claude accepted the somewhat redundant explanation, that they were making themselves at home, with every sign of approval. Nor was he slow in introducing

his friends; but for once the Duke was refreshingly subdued, if not shy; and for the first few minutes the others had their heads together over the large-paper edition, for whose "decorations" the draftsman himself had not the least to say, where all admired. At length Claude passed the open volume to his cousin; needless to say it was open at the frontispiece; but the first and only thing that Jack saw was the author's name in red capitals on the title-page opposite.

"Claude Lafont!" he read out. "Why, you don't ever mean – to tell me – that's you, old brusher?"

Claude smiled and coloured.

"You an author!" continued the Duke in a wide-eyed wonder. "And you never told me! Well, no wonder you can talk like a book when you can write one, too! So this is your latest, is it?"

"The limited large-paper edition," said Claude. "Only seventy-five copies printed, and I sign them all. How does it strike you – physically, I mean?"

"'Physically' is quite pleasing," murmured Stubbs; and Claude helped him to more whisky.

Jack looked at the book. The back was of a pale brown cardboard; the type had a curious, olden air about it; the paper was thick, and its edges elaborately ragged. The Duke asked if it was a new book. It looked to him a hundred years old, he said, and discovered that he had paid a pretty compliment unawares.

"There's one thing, however," he added: "we could chop leaves as well as that in the back-blocks!"

The Impressionist grinned; his friend drank deep, with a corrugated brow; the poet expounded the beauties of the rough edge, and Jack gave him back his book.

"I know nothing about it," said he; "but still, I'm proud of you, I am so. And I'm proud," he added, "to find myself in such company as yours, gentlemen; though I don't mind telling you, if I'd known I'd be the only plain man in the room I'd never have come upstairs!"

And the Duke sat down in a corner, with his knife, his tobacco, and his cutty-pipe, as shy as a great boy in a roomful of girls. Yet this wore off, for the conversation of the elect did not, after all, rarefy the atmosphere to oppression; indeed, that of the sensitised soul contained more oaths than Jack had heard from one mouth since he left the bush, and this alone was enough to put him at his ease. At the same time he was repelled, for it appeared to be a characteristic of the great Stubbs to turn up his nose at all men; and as that organ was *retroussé* to begin with, Jack was forcibly reminded of some ill-bred, snarling bulldog, and he marvelled at the hound's reputation. He put in no word, however, until the conversation turned on Claude's poems, and a particularly cool, coarse thing was said of one of them, and Claude only laughed. Then he did speak up.

"See here, mister," he blurted out from his corner. "Could you do as good?"

Stubbs stared at the Duke, and drained his glass.

"I shouldn't try," was his reply.

"I wouldn't," retorted Jack. "I just wouldn't, if I were you."

Stubbs could better have parried a less indelicate, a less childish thrust; as it was, he reached for his hat. Claude interfered at once.

"My dear old fellow," said he to Jack, "you mustn't mind what my friend Edmund says of my stuff. I like it. He is always right, for one thing; and then, only think of the privilege of having such a critic to tell one exactly what he thinks."

Jack looked from one man to the other. The sincerity of the last speech was not absolutely convincing, but that of Claude's feeling for his friend was obvious enough; and, with a laugh, the Duke put his back against the door. The apology which he delivered in that position was in all respects characteristic. It was unnecessarily full; it was informed alike by an extravagant good-will towards mankind, and an irritating personal humility; and it ended, somewhat to Claude's dismay, with a direct invitation to both his friends to spend a month at Maske Towers.

Perhaps these young men realised then, for the first time, who the rough fellow was, after all, with whom they had been thrown in contact. At all events the double invitation was accepted with alacrity; and no more hard things were said of Claude's lyrics. The flow of soul was henceforth as uninterrupted as that of the whisky down the visitors' throats. And no further hitch would have occurred had the Impressionist not made that surreptitious sketch of the Duke, which so delighted his friends.

"Oh, admirable!" cried Claude. "A most suggestive humouresque!"

"It'll do," said Stubbs, the oracle. "It mightn't appeal to the suburbs, damn them, but it does to us."

"Grant the convention, and the art is perfect," continued Claude, with the tail of his eye on Jack.

"It is the caricature that is more like than life," pursued Stubbs, with a sidelong glance in the same direction.

Jack saw these looks; but from his corner he could not see the sketch, nor had he any suspicion of its subject. All else that he noted was the flush of triumph, or it may have been whisky, or just possibly both, on the pale, fringed face of Impressionism. He held out his hand for the half-sheet of paper on which the sketch had been made.

"I hope it won't offend you," exclaimed the artist, hesitating.

"Offend me! Why should it? Let's have a look!"

And he looked for more than a minute at the five curves and a beard which had expressed to quicker eyes the quintessence of his own outward and visible personality. At first he could make nothing of them; even when an interpretation dawned upon him, his face was puzzled as he raised it to the trio hanging on his words.

"It won't do, mister," said the Duke reluctantly. "You'll never get saplings like them," tapping the five curves with his forefinger, "to hold a nest like that," putting his thumb on the beard, "and don't you believe it."

There was a moment's silence. Then the Impressionist said thickly:

"Give me that sketch."

Jack handed it back. In another moment it was littering the ground in four pieces, and the door had banged behind the indignant draftsman.

"What on earth have I done?" cried the Duke, aghast.

"You have offended Llewellyn," replied Claude shortly.

"How? By what I said? I'll run after him this minute and apologise. I never meant to hurt his feelings. Where's that stove-pipe hat?"

"Let *me* go," said Stubbs, getting up. "I understand the creative animal; it is thin-skinned; but I'll tell our friend what you say."

"I wish you would. Tell him I meant no harm. And fetch him down with you just whenever you can come."

"Thanks – that will be very pleasing. I daresay August will be our best time, but we shall let you know. I'll put it all right with Ivor; but these creative asses (saving your presence, Lafont) never can see a joke."

"A joke!" cried Jack, when he and Claude were alone.

"Stubbs is ironical," said Claude severely.

"Look here," said the Duke, "what are you givin' us, old boy? Seems to me you clever touchers have been getting at a cove between you. Where does this joke come in, eh?"

And his good faith was so obvious that Claude picked up the four quarters of torn paper, fitted them together, and entered upon yet another explanation. This one, however, was somewhat impatiently given and received. The Duke professed to think his likeness exceedingly unlike – when, indeed, he could be got to see his own outlines at all – and Claude disagreeing, a silence fell

between the pair. Jack sought to break it by taking off his collar (which had made him miserable) and putting it in his pocket with a significant look; but the act provoked no comment. So the two men sat, the one smoking cigarettes, the other his cutty, but neither speaking, nor yet reading a line. And the endless roar of Piccadilly, reaching them through the open windows, emphasised their silence, until suddenly it sank beneath the midnight chimes of the city clocks. In another minute a tiny, tinkling echo came from Claude's chimney-piece, and the Duke put down his pipe and spoke.

"My first whole day in London – a goner," he said; "and a pretty full day it's been. Listen to this for one day's work," and as he rehearsed them, he ticked off the events on his great brown fingers. "Got run in – that's number one. Turned up among a lot of swells in my old duds – number two. Riled the cleverest man you know – number three – so that he nearly cleared out of your rooms; and, not content with that, hurt the feelings of the second cleverest (present company excepted) so that he *did* clear – which is number four. Worst of all, riled you, old man, and hurt your feelings too. That's the finisher. And see here, Claude, it isn't good enough and it won't do. I won't wash in London, and I'm full up of the hole; as for my own house, it gave me the fair hump the moment I put my nose inside; and I'd be on to make tracks up the bush any day you like – if it weren't for one thing."

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