MY LORD DUKE.

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 from 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 "vulgarily in love" (as she called it) with the aesthetic 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."