CHAPTER X.

"DEAD NUTS."

It was three o'clock in the early morning of the twentieth of August. A single jet of gas, lighting a torch in the mailed hand of a life-size man-at-arms, burnt audibly in the silent hall; making the worst of each lugubrious feature, like a match struck in a cavern. And Claude Lafont was sitting up alone, in the Poet's Corner, at work upon his birthday offering to Olivia Sellwood.

At three, however, it was finished in the rough. The poet then stretched his fingers, took a clean sheet of paper, and started upon the fair copy in his prettiest hand. It began—

"What songs have I to sing you?
What tales have I to tell?"

And there it stuck, as though these questions were indeed unanswerable; the fact being, there was another still to come, which, however, involved an execrable couplet as it stood. Claude twisted it about for half an hour;
realised its gratuitous badness; tried not to ask this inane question at all, hunted his rhyming dictionary up and down and found he must; and finally, with a prayer that it might impose upon Olivia, and another for forgiveness from the Muse, finished his first stanza with—

“What garlands can I bring you
From Fancy’s fairest dell?
Before the world grew old, dear,
The lute was lighter strung;
Now all the tales are told, dear,
And all the songs are sung.”

It is needless to quote more. The sentiments were superior to their setting. An affectionate camaraderie was employed, with success, as a cloak for those warmer feelings of whose existence in his own bosom the poor poet was now practically convinced. And the lines in themselves were not all or wholly bad; there was a certain knack in them, and here and there some charm. But if infinite pains could have made them a work of genius, that they would have been. It was almost five when Claude made his best signature at the foot of the last verse; yet there were but four of these, or thirty-two lines in all.
He put them in an envelope which he sealed deliberately with his signet-ring. The deliberation of all his private doings was enormous; neither the hour nor an empty stomach could induce briskness at the expense of pains. Yet Claude was exceedingly hungry, and the night had put an edge on his nerves. As he paced the floor the undue distinction between his steps, so soft on the rugs, and so loud on the parquetry, became exaggerated in his nervous ears; and all the silence and all the darkness of the sleeping Towers seemed to press upon that single lamp-lit, sounding room, like fathoms of wide sea upon a diver's helm. Claude had not thought of such things while he was still at work; he had rather overdone matters, and he poured out a sparing measure of whisky from the decanter upon the table.

There were other glasses with dregs at the bottom. The air was tainted with stale smoke, and within the fender lay the remains of many cigarettes. This was why Claude was so late. He had been late in making a start. Stubbs and Llewellyn had sat up with him till the small hours. The Poet's Corner was the one spot in
which these young men seemed really at home. Here, by midnight, but seldom before, they could manage to create unto themselves their own element; for their Philistine host went early to his eccentric lair; but there were always his easy-chairs to lounge in, his whisky to drink, and Claude Lafont to listen to their talk.

Not that the poet was so good a listener as he had been once; the truth being that he found himself a little out of touch with his clever friends—he hardly knew why. It might be the living under one roof with them—he himself would never have asked them down. Or it might be the simultaneous hourly contact with an opposite type of man—the kindly, unaffected dunce—the unburnished nugget, reeking yet of the Australian soil, but with the gold wearing brighter every day.

Certain it was that the benefit of the cousins' close companionship had not been all on one side. If the force of example had toned down some of Jack's pristine roughness of speech and manner, it had taken a like effect upon sundry peculiarities of a converse character.
in Claude. In a word, there had been an ideal interchange between the two, founded on a mutual liking. The amelioration of the Duke was sufficiently obvious to all; that of Claude struck Olivia especially, who had never been blind to his faults; needless to add, he was himself the last to see how he had changed. Yet he divined something of it now. As he thought of the verses he had just written, and of the critic to whom he would have submitted them in all humility a couple of months ago, he knew that he was no longer as he had been then; for he had not the faintest intention of allowing that critic to see these verses at all.

So Claude calmed his nerves, eating biscuits the while, and sipping soda-water merely tinctured with whisky; until all at once the lamp began to flicker and to smell, and the song of the birds, singing in Olivia's birthday, came at last to his ears through the plate-glass and rich curtains of the octagonal window. Then he rose; and in half a minute the lamp was out, the curtains were drawn, a sash was thrown up, and the risen sun was shining
mercilessly on the dishevelled head and blue chin and battered shirt-front of Claude Lafont.

The cool, fresh scene inspired him with delight; it was indeed a disgraceful novelty to the poet. He thought nothing of rhyming "morn" with "dawn," and yet of this phenomenon itself he had little or no experience. He would gain some now; he also promised himself the unique pleasure of rousing the early-rising Jack. So he got out of the window, and soaked his feet in the dew, only to meet Jack emerging from his hut, with towels on his arm, as he approached it. Nor was the Duke's surprise very flattering; but his chaff was fair enough. He was himself about to bathe in the creek at the north end of the tank. Would Claude join him and then go back to the hut for an early pannikin of bush tea? Claude would, and did, feeling (as all felt at Jack's hut) that he had been flashed through the thick of the earth, and come out in the wilds of Australia.

In the hut a log fire had burnt well up by the time they returned with wet towels and glowing skins. Over the flames hung the
billy-can, with boiling water throbbing against the side. Jack lifted it down with a stick, and threw a handful of tea among the bubbles. "Shall I sweeten it?" he then asked; and, at Claude's nod, threw in another handful of brown sugar.

"There, that's real bush tea for you," continued the Duke, in a simmer of satisfaction himself as he stirred the mixture with the stick. "Now take the pannikin and dip it in. There's no milk, mind; that wouldn't be the thing at all. Here are some biscuits, and they aren't the thing either. I'd have made you a damper, only I never could strike a camp-oven; it's been trouble enough to raise the plant I've got. What do you think of the tea?"

"Capital!" cried Claude, who was seated on the bunk. And indeed the whole thing appealed to his poetic palate; for he could not forget that this hut was within half a mile of the Towers themselves, in which the Duke took evidently far less pleasure; and the many-sided contrast amused his literary sense, even while it piqued his family pride.

"How I wish it was the real thing!" said
Jack, with a sigh. "I'd have a camp-oven, then, and you should have your mutton chop and damper served up hot. I used to be an artist at a damper. Then after breakfast I'd take you with me round the paddocks, and you'd help me muster a mob and drive them to the tank; and you'd hear them bleat and see them start to run when they smelt the water. My colonial oath, I can see 'em and hear 'em now! Then we'd give our mokes a drink in the middle of 'em, and we'd take a pull at our own water-bags. Then we might camp under the nearest hop-bush for a snack, and I should yard you up at the homestead, and make you know my old boss before the day was over. What a day it would be for you! You wouldn't believe the sky could get so blue or your face so red. But it's no use talking—here we are again!" And he set down his empty pannikin with another sigh.

"You wouldn't really prefer that life to this?

"No; perhaps not; but I like to think of it, as you can see."

"Surely you like your new life best by this time? You wouldn't go back there now?"
"I like my new friends best; I wouldn't go back on them. Olivia and you, for instance."

"It's her birthday," said Claude; but a silence had intervened.

"So it is. God bless her! I haven't got her anything, because I seemed to make a mull of it with those flowers. Have you?"

"Yes, I have a trifle for her; it's rather a different thing on her birthday, you know. And—and I've written her a few verses; that's what I've been doing all night."

"Clever dog!" said Jack, enviously. "See what it is to be a man of genius; here's where it comes in so handy. And has Llewellyn done her something, too?"

"Yes; a portrait of herself."

"Well, let him label it to that effect, or she may put her foot in it like me. He never shows me his blooming drawings now. But I wish you'd let me see your poem."

"It's not all that; it's only verses, and pretty bad ones too; still, you shall hear them if you like, and if I can remember them," said Claude, who would have found much more difficulty in forgetting them so soon. "I only wish
they were better! There are some lamentable lines here and there. I tried to iron them out, but they wouldn't all come."

"Go on!" cried Jack, lighting his pipe. "I'll tell you whether they're good or bad. You go ahead!"

And Claude did so, only too glad of a second opinion of any kind; for he had little or no intellectual self-reliance, and was ever ready to think his productions good or bad with their latest critic. On this occasion, however, he would have been better pleased with the general enthusiasm of the Duke, had not the latter proceeded to point out particular merits, when it transpired that the ingenuity of the rhymes was what impressed him most. Knowing where they came from, the poet himself was unable to take much pride in this feature.

"They're splendid," reiterated Jack. "You ought to be the laureate, old man, and I've a good mind to tell 'em so in the House of Lords. You're far and away ahead of Shakespeare at rhyming; he hardly ever rhymes at all; I know that because there used to be a copy of him in my old hut. I say, I like that about the
garlands from Fancy's dell; that's real poetry, that is. But do you mind giving me the last four lines again?”

Claude gave them:—

“While yet the world was young, dear,
Your minstrel might be bold:
Now all the songs are sung, dear,
And all the tales are told.”

“First-chop,” said Jack, whose look, however, was preoccupied. “But what's that you're driving at about the minstrel being bolder? What was it you'd have said if only you'd had the cheek? Say it to me. Out with it!”

“I don't know, really,” said Claude, laughing.

“Then I do: you're dead nuts on Olivia!”

“What's that?”

“You like her!”

“Naturally.”

“As much as I do!”

“That all depends how much you like her, Jack.”

There was a moment's pause. The Duke was sitting on his heels in front of the fire, into which he was also staring fixedly; so that it was impossible to tell whether the red light
upon his face was spontaneous or reflected. And he spoke out now without turning his head.

"Old man," he said, "I've wanted a straight word with you this long time—about Olivia. Of course I know I oughtn't to call her Olivia behind her back, when I daren't to her face; but that's what she is in my own heart, you see—and that's where she's pegged out a claim for good and all. Understand? We can't all talk like books, old man! Still I want to make myself as plain as possible."

"You do so. I understand perfectly," said Claude Lafont.

"That's all right. Well, as I was saying, she's pegged out a claim that no other woman is ever going to jump. And what I was going to say was this: you remember that night in your rooms in town? I mean when I said I meant no harm, and all that; because I spoke too soon. Worse still, I felt mean when I did speak; it didn't ring true; and long I've known that even then there was only one thing that would have held me back. That was—if she'd been your girl! I gave you a chance of saying if she was, but you only laughed; and sometimes I've thought..."
your laugh wasn’t any truer than my word. So I’ve got to have it in plain English before I go the whole hog. Claude—old man—she never was—your girl?"

“Never,” said Claude, decidedly.

“You never asked her—what I think of asking one of these days?”

“Never.”

“Thank God, old man! I’m dead nuts on her myself, I tell you frankly; and I mean to tell her when I can rake together the pluck. I’m not sure I can keep it to myself much longer. The one thing I’m sure of is that she’ll laugh in my face—if she isn’t too riled! I hear her doing it every night of my life as I lie where you’re sitting and listen to the pines outside. I hear her saying every blessed thing but ‘yes!’ Yet it isn’t such cheek as all that, is it, Claude? I want your candid opinion. I’m not such a larrikin as I was that day you met me, am I?”

And he turned to the other with a simple, strong humility, very touching in him; but Claude jumped up, and getting behind him so that their eyes should not meet, laid his hands affectionately on the Duke’s shoulders.
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“You are not the same man,” he said with a laugh; “yet you are the same good fellow! I could wish Olivia no better fate—than the one you think of. So I wish you luck—from my heart. And now let us go.”

On the lawn they found the Home Secretary driving a dozen golf-balls into space from an impromptu tee. He had come for good now, the session being over at last. And this was his daily exercise before breakfast, and his valet’s daily grievance, whose duty it was to recover the balls.

Mr. Sellwood accompanied the younger men into the house, where Claude had still to shave and dress; but the Duke was the uninterested witness of an interesting scene, between the Home Secretary and his wife, before anyone else came down to breakfast. The subject was that of the Nottingham murder.

“They are making an example of you!” said Lady Caroline bitterly, looking up from her husband’s daily stack of press-cuttings, which she always opened.

“Let them,” said Mr. Sellwood, from the depths of the Sportsman, which he read before any of his letters.
"They call it a judicial murder—and upon my word, so do I! Your decision is most unpopular; they clamour for your resignation—and I must say that I should do the same. Here's a cartoon of you playing golf with a human skull for the ball!"

"Exactly how I mean to spend my day—barring the skull."

"They know it, too; it's a public scandal; even if it wasn't, I should be ashamed of myself, with that poor man awaiting his end!"

"He was hanged five minutes ago," declared the Home Secretary, consulting his watch. "And I may as well tell you, my dear, that I had his full confession in my pocket when I gave my decision the night before last. It appears in this morning's papers. And I fancy that's my hole," added Mr. Sellwood, nodding at Jack.

But Jack had no more to say than Lady Caroline, utterly routed for once. The Duke did not perhaps appreciate the situation, or perhaps he was not listening; for his eyes hung very wistfully on Olivia's plate, which was laden and surrounded by birthday offerings of many
descriptions. There were several packets by post, and an open cheque from the Home Secretary. Claude had added his beautifully sealed envelope before going upstairs, and now Llewellyn came in with his "likeness of a lady." The lady was evidently lost in a fog; the likeness did not exist; and the whole production was exactly like a photographic failure which is both out of focus and "over-exposed." But it was better than poor Jack's contribution of nothing at all.