CHAPTER XII.

THE WRONG MAN.

The Duke had proceeded to his hut with the slow and slouching gait of a man bemused; yet the strings of his body were as those of a lute, and there was an inordinate keen edge to his every sense. He heard the deer cropping the grass far behind him; and he counted the very reverberations of the stable clock striking a half-hour in the still air. It was the half-hour after midnight. The moon still slanted among the pines, and Jack followed his own shadow, with his beard splayed against his shirt-front, until within a few yards of his hut. Then he looked quickly up and about. But the hut was obviously intact; there was the moon twinkling in the padlock of which the key was in his pocket; and Jack returned to his examination of the ground.

He was a very old bushman; he had a blackfellow's eye for a footprint, and he had struck a trail here which he knew to be recent.
and not his own. He followed it to the padlocked door, and round the hut, and back to the door. He found the two heel-marks where the man had sat down to think some matter over. Then he took out his key and went within, but left the door wide open; and while his back was still turned to it, for he could not find his matches, there was a slight noise there, and the moon's influx was stemmed by a man's body.

"Good morning, Hunt," said Jack, without turning round.

The tone, no less than the words, took the intruder all aback. He had planned a pretty surprise, only to receive a prettier for his pains.

"How did you know it was me?" he cried.

"By your voice," was the reply; and the matches were found at last.

"But before that?"

"I expected you. Why didn't you go on sitting there with your back to the door?"

"You saw me!" cried Hunt, coming in.

"I saw your tracks. Hullo! Be good enough to step outside again."
"I've come to talk to you——"

"Quite so; but we'll talk outside."

And Hunt had to go with what grace he might. Jack followed with a couple of camp-stools, pulled the door to, sat down on one of the stools, and motioned Hunt to the other. The great smooth face shook slowly in reply; and the moonlight showed a bulbous bruise between the eyes, which made its author frown and feel at fault.

"Yes, you may look!" said Hunt through the gap in his set teeth which was a piece of the same handiwork. "You hit hard enough, but I can hit harder where it hurts more. A fine Duke you are! Oh, yes; double your fists again—do. You won't hit me this time. There's no one looking on!"

"Don't be too sure, my boy," replied Jack. "Don't you make any mistake!"

Hunt stuck a foot upon his camp-stool and leant forward over his knee.

"Recollect why you struck me to-night?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, I deserved it—for being such a fool as to say what I had to say at a time like that."
It was the drink said it, not me; I apologise again for saying it there, I apologise to you and me too. I was keeping it to say here."

"Out with it," said Jack, who to his own astonishment was preserving a perfect calm; as he spoke he began filling a pipe that he had brought out with the matches.

"One thing at a time," said Hunt, producing a greasy bank-book. "I'll out with this first. You may have heard that the old Duke had a kind of weakness for my folks?"

"I have heard something of the sort."

"Then I'll trouble you to run your eye over this here pass-book. It belongs to my old dad. It'll show you his account with the London and Provincial Bank at Devenholme. It's a small account. This here book goes back over ten years, and there's some blank leaves yet. But look at it for yourself; keep your eye on the left-hand page from first to last; and you'll see what you'll see."

Jack did so; and what he saw on every left-hand page was this: "per Maitland, £50." There were other entries, "by cheque" and "by cash," but they were few and small.
Clearly Maitland was the backbone of the account; and a closer inspection revealed the further fact that his name appeared punctually every quarter, and always in connection with the sum of fifty pounds received.

"Ever heard of Maitland, Hollis, Cripps and Co.?" inquired Hunt.

Jack started; so this was the Maitland, "They are my solicitors," he said.

"They were the old Duke's, too," replied Hunt. "Now have a look at the other side of the account. You know the Lower Farm; then look and see what we pay for rent."

"I know the figure," said Jack, handing back the pass-book. "It is half the value."

"Less than half—though I say it! And what does all this mean—two hundred a year paid up without fail by Maitland, Hollis, Cripps and Co., and the Lower Farm very near rent free? It means," said Hunt, leaning forward, with an evil gleam on each side of his angry bruise—"it means that something's bought of us as doesn't appear. You can guess what for
yourself. Our silence! Two hundred a year, and the Lower Farm at a nominal rent, all for keeping a solitary secret!"

"Then I should advise you to go on keeping it," said Jack, with cool point; yet for all his nonchalance, his heart was in a flutter enough now; for he knew what was coming—he caught himself wondering how much or how little it surprised him.

"All very fine," he heard Hunt saying—a long way off as it seemed to him—whereas he was really bending farther forward than before. "All very fine! But what if this secret has improved in value with keeping? Improved, did I say? Lord's truth, it's gone up a thousand per cent. in the last few weeks; and who do you suppose sent it up? Why, you! I'll tell you how. I dessay you can guess; still I'll tell you, then there'll be no mistakes. You've heard things of your father? You know the sort he was? You won't knock me down again for mentioning it, will you? I thought not! Well, when the Red Marquis, as they used to call him, was a young man about the house here, my old dad was in the stables; and my old dad's young
sister was the Duchess's own maid—a slapping fine girl, they tell me, but she was dead before I can remember. Well, and something happened; something often does. But this was something choice. Guess what!"

"He married her."

"He did. He married her at the parish church of Chelsea, in the name of Augustus William Greville Maske, his real name all but the title; still, he married the girl."

"Quite right, too!"

"Oh, quite right, was it? Stop a bit. You were born in 1855. You told me so yourself; you may remember the time, and you stake your life I don't forget it. It was the sweetest music I ever heard, was that there date! Shall I tell you why? Why, because them two—the Red Marquis and his mother's maid—were married on October 22nd, 1853."

"Well?"

Hunt took out a handful of cigars which had been provided for all comers in the evening; he had filled his pockets with them; and now he selected one by the light of the setting moon and lit it deliberately. Then he
puffed a mouthful of smoke in Jack's direction, and grinned.

"'Well,' says you; and you may well 'well!' For the Red Marquis deserted his wife and went out to Australia before he'd been married a month. And out there he married again. But you were five years old, my fine fellow, before his first wife died, and was buried in this here parish! You can look at her tombstone for yourself. She died and was buried as Eliza Hunt; and just that much was worth two hundred a year to us for good and all; because, you see, I'm sorry to say she never had a child."

Both in substance and in tone this last statement was the most convincing of all. Here was an insolent exultation tempered by a still more insolent regret; and the very incompleteness of the triumph engraved it the deeper with the stamp of harsh reality.

Jack saw his position steadily in all its bearings. He was nobody. A little time ago he had stepped into Claude's shoes, but now Claude would step into his. Well, thank God that it was Claude! And yet—
and yet—that saving fact made facts of all the rest.

"I've no doubt your yarn is quite true," said Jack, still in a tone that amazed himself: "But of course you have some proofs on paper?"

"Plenty."

"Then why couldn't you come out with all this before?"

Hunt gave so broad a grin that a volume of smoke escaped haphazard from his gaping mouth.

"You'd punished me," he said, admiring the red end of his cigar; "I'd got you to punish in your turn, and with interest. So I gave you time to get to like the old country in general, and this here spot in particular; to say nothing of coming the Duke; I meant that to grow on you too. I hope as I gave you time enough? This here hut don't look altogether like it, you know!"

Jack's right hand was caressing the loaded revolver in the breast-pocket of his dress coat; it was the cold, solid power of the little living weapon that kept the man himself cool and strong in his extremity.
“Quite fair,” he remarked. “Any other reason?”

“One other.”

“What was that?”

“Well, you see, it’s like this”—and Hunt dropped his insolence for a confidential tone far harder to brook. “It’s like this,” he repeated, plumping down on the camp-stool in front of Jack: “there’s nobody knows of that there marriage but us Hunts. We’ve kep’ it a dead secret for nearly forty years, and we don’t want to let it out now. But, as I say, the secret’s gone up in value. Surely it’s worth more than two hundred a year to you? You don’t want to be knocked sideways by that there Claude Lafont, do you? Yet he’s the next man. You’d never let yourself be chucked out by a chap like that?”

“That’s my business. What’s your price?”

“Two thousand.”

“A year?”

“Two thousand a year. Come, it’s worth that to you if it’s worth a penny-piece. Think of your income!”

“Think of yours. Two hundred on condition
you kept a single secret! That was the condition, wasn’t it?"

"Well?"

“You've let the secret out, you cur!” cried Jack, jumping to his feet. "And you've lost your income by it for good and all. Two thousand! You'll never see another two hundred. What! Did you take me for a dirty skunk like yourself? Do you think I got in this position through my own fault or of my own accord? Do you think I'm so sweet on it as to sit tight at the mercy of a thing like you? Not me! What you've told me to-night the real Duke and his lawyers shall hear to-morrow; and think yourself lucky if you aren't run in for your shot at a damnable conspiracy! Did you really suppose I cared as much as all that? Do you think—oh! for God's sake, clear out, man, before I do you any more damage!"

“Oh, you're good at that,” said Hunt through his broken tooth. He had risen and now he retreated a few paces. “You're not bad with your fists, you fool, but I've come prepared for you this time!” and he drew a knife; but the revolver covered him next instant.
"And I for you," retorted Jack. "I give you five seconds to clear out in. One—two—"

"My God, are there such fools—"

"Three—four—"

The man was gone. At a safer range he stopped again to threaten and gloat, to curse and to coax alternately. But Jack took no more notice; he turned into the hut, flung the pistol on the table, and stood motionless until the railing died away. Yet he had heeded never a word of it, but was rather reminded that it had been, by its very cessation, as one notes the stopping of a clock. It made him look out once more, however; and, looking, he saw the last of Matthew Hunt in the moonlit spaces among the pines. His retreating steps died slowly away. The snapping of a twig was just audible a little afterwards. And then in the mellow distance the stable clock chimed and struck one; and again Jack found himself keeping an imaginary count of the reverberations until all was still.

He stood at the door a moment longer. The feathered barbs of the pine-trees were
drawn in ink upon a starry slate. The night was as mild and clear and silent as many a one in the Riverina itself; and Jack tried to think himself there; to regard this English summer as the bushman's dream that he had so often imagined it here in his model bush hut. But his imagination was very stubborn to-night. The stately home which was not his rose in his mind's eye between him and the stars; once more he saw it illumined in a flash from spire to terrace; once more the portico columns marched forward as one man, while the six eagles flew out in the tympanum above; and though a purring arose from his feet, and something soft and warm rubbed kindly against his shins, he could no longer forget where he was and who he was not. He was not the Duke. He was the wrong man after all. And the hut that he had built and inhabited, as a protest against all this grandeur, was a monument of irony such as the hand of man had never reared in all the world before.

The wrong man! He flung himself upon the elaborately rude bed to grapple with those three words until he might grasp what they
meant to himself. And as he lay, his little cat leapt softly up and purred upon his heart, as if it knew the aching need there of a sympathy beyond the reach of words.

Only one aspect of his case came home to him now, but that was its worst aspect. The life he was to lose mattered little after all. He might miss it more than he had once thought; it was probable he would but truly appreciate it when it was a life of the past, as is the way of a man. Yet even that could be borne. The losing of the girl was different and a million times worse. But lose her he must: for what was he now? Instead of a Duke a nobody; not even a decently born peasant; a nameless husk of humanity, a derelict, a nonentity, the natural son of a notorious rake. Must he go back then to the bush, and back alone? Must he put himself beyond the reach of soft words and softer eyes for ever? He could feel again that little hand within his arm; and it was worse a hundredfold than the vision of the Towers lit from end to end by the light of a bursting rocket. Would not the grave itself—
Wait.

There was the pistol on the table. The pale light lay along the barrel. He held his breath and lay gazing at the faint gleam until it grew into a blinding sun that scorched him to the soul. And he hardly knew what he had done when Claude Lafont found him wandering outside with the hot pistol still in his hand.

Jack looked upon the breathless poet with dull eyes that slowly brightened; then he pressed the lever, shot out the empty cartridges, blew through the chambers, and handed the revolver back to Claude.

"I've no more use for it. I'm much obliged to you. No, I've done no damage with it; that's just the point. I was emptying it for safety's sake. I'm so sorry you heard. I—I did think of emptying it—through my own head."

"In Heaven's name, why?"

"Only for a moment, though. It would have been a poor trick after all. Still I had to empty it first and see that afterwards."

"But why? What on earth has happened?"

"I'm not the man after all."
THE WRONG MAN.

"What man?"
"The Duke of St. Osmund's."

And Claude was made to hear everything before he was allowed the free expression of his astonishment and incredulity. Then he laughed. His incredulity remained.

"My dear fellow," he cried, "there's not a word of truth in the whole story. It's one colossal fraud. Hunt's a blackguard. I wouldn't believe his oath in a court of justice."

"What about the bank-book?"
"A fraud within a fraud!"

"Not it. I'll answer for that. Oh, no; we could have inquired at the bank. Hunt's a blackguard, but no fool. And you know what my father was; from all accounts he wasn't the man to think twice about a little job like bigamy."

"I wouldn't say that; few men of our sort would be so reckless in such a matter," declared the poet. "Now, from all I know of him, I should have said it was most inconsistent with his character to marry the girl at all. Everything but that! And surely it's quite possible
to explain even that two hundred a year without swallowing such a camel as downright bigamy. My grandfather was a sort of puritanical monomaniac; even in the days of his mental vigour I can remember him as a sterner moralist than any of one's schoolmasters or college dons. Then, too, he was morbidly sensitive about the family failings and traditions, and painfully anxious to improve the tone of our house. Bear that in mind and conceive as gross a scandal as you like—but not bigamy. Do you mean to tell me that a man like my grandfather would have thought two hundred a year for all time too much to pay for hushing such a thing up for all time? Not he—not he!” There fell a heavy hand upon Claude's back.

“Claude, old boy, I always said you were a genius. Do you know, I never thought of that?”

“It's obvious; besides, there's the Eliza Hunt on the gravestone, I've seen it myself. But look here—I'll tell you what I'll do.”

“What, old man?”

“I'll run up to town to-morrow and see
Maitland, Hollis, Cripps about the whole matter. They've paid the money; they are the men to know all about it. Stop a moment! Hunt was clever enough to have an exact date for the marriage. What was it again?"

"October 22nd, 1853."

"I think he said Chelsea parish church?"

"He did."

Claude scribbled a note of each point on his shirt-cuff.

"That's all I want," said he. "I'll run up by the first train, and back by the last. Meanwhile, take my word for it, you're as safe as the Queen upon her throne."

"And you?" said Jack.

"Oh, never mind me; I'm very well as I am."

Claude was fully conscious of his semi-heroic attitude; indeed he enjoyed it, as he had enjoyed many a less inevitable pose in his day. But that he could not help; and Jack was perhaps the last person in the world to probe beneath the surface of a kind action. His great hand found Claude's, and his deep voice quivered with emotion.
"I don't know how it is," he faltered, "but
this thing has got at me more than I meant it to. Hark at that! Three o'clock; it'll
be light before we know where we are; you
won't leave a fellow till it is, will you? I'm
in a funk! I've got to believe the worst
till I know otherwise—that's all about it. The
day I shan't mind tackling by myself, but for
God's sake don't go and leave me to-night.
You've got to go in the morning; stop the
rest of the night out here with me. You shall
have the bunk, and I'll doss down on the floor.
I'll light the fire and brew a billy of tea this
minute if only you'll stay with me now. Didn't you once say you'd have hold of my
sleeve? And so you have had, old man, so
you have had: only now's your time—more
than ever."

Claude was deeply moved by the spectacle
of a stronger man than himself so stricken in
every nerve. He looked very compassionately
upon the eager open face. There were a few
grey hairs about each temple, but in the
faint starlight they looked perfectly white;
and there were crow's-feet under the eyes that
seemed to have escaped his attention till now. He consented to remain on one condition: he must go back and put out the lights, and close the windows in the Poet's Corner. So Jack went with him; and those lights were the only sign of life in all the vast expanse of ancient masonry, that still belonged to one of them, though they knew not now to which. It was this thought, perhaps, that kept both men silent on the terrace when the lights had been put out and the windows shut. Then Jack ran his arm affectionately through that of Claude, and together they turned their backs upon those debatable stones.