CHAPTER XIII.

THE INTERREGNUM.

Lady Caroline Sellwood was delighted to find Jack in the hall on making her descent next morning. He appeared lost, however, in a gloomy admiration of the ghostly guard in armour. The attitude and the expression were alike so foreign to him that Lady Caroline halted on the stairs. But only for a moment; the next, Jack was overwhelmed by the soft tempest of her goodwill, and making prodigious efforts to return her smiles.

Suddenly she became severe.

"You're knocked up! You look as if you hadn't had a wink of sleep. Oh, I knew how it would be after all that racket; you dear, naughty Duke, you should have spared yourself more!"

"I was a fool," admitted Jack. "But—but I say, Lady Caroline, I do wish you wouldn't Duke me!"
"How sweet of you," murmured Lady Caroline.

"You know you didn't last night!" he hastily reminded her.

"But that was an occasion."

"So is this!" exclaimed Jack, and his tone struck the other more than she showed.

"Where is Claude?" inquired Lady Caroline suddenly.

"On his way to Devenholme."

"Devenholme!"

"And London, for the day. He had to catch the 9.40."

"So he has gone up to town! Odd that one never heard anything about it—I mean to say he could have made himself so useful to one. May I ask when he decided to go?"

Jack hesitated. He had been charged to keep a discreet tongue during Claude's absence; he had been supplied with a number of reasons and excuses ready-made; but perfect frankness was an instinctive need of this primitive soul, whose present thoughts stood out in easy print upon his face, even as he resolved to resist his instincts for once.
"He decided—this morning," said Jack at last; and he took from his pocket a lengthy newspaper cutting attached to a pale green slip. "This is an article on him and his books, that has just appeared in the Parthenon. What wouldn't I give to lay a hold of the brute who wrote it! I call it the sort of thing to answer with a hiding. It's one of a series headed 'Our Minor Poets,' which Claude says has been bad enough all through; but this article on him is the worst and most brutal of the lot. And—and—and old Claude took it to heart, of course; and—and he's run up to town for the day."

"Because of a severe criticism! I should have thought he was used to them by now. Poor dear Claude, he can string a pretty rhyme, but he never was a poet. And you, Jack—since you insist—you never were an actor—until to-day!"

Jack hung his head.

"You don't do it well enough, you dear fellow," continued Lady Caroline, caressingly. "As if you could impose upon me! You must first come to me for lessons. Candidly now:
what has taken him up to town in such a hurry? The same thing that—kept you awake all night?"

"Candidly, then," said Jack, raising his haggard face doggedly, "it was! And if you'll come out upon the terrace for five minutes I'll tell you exactly what's wrong. You have a right to know; and I can trust you not to let it go any further for the moment. Even if I couldn't, I'd have to tell you straight! I hate keeping things up my sleeve; I can't do it; so let me make a clean breast of the whole shoot, Lady Caroline, and be done with it till Claude comes back."

Lady Caroline took a discouraging view of the situation. The Red Marquis had been capable of anything; related though they had been, she could not help telling Jack that her parents had forbidden her to dance with his father as a young girl. This might be painful hearing, but in such a crisis it was necessary to face the possibilities; and Lady Caroline, drawing a little away from her companion in order to see how he was facing them, forgot to take his arm any more as they sauntered in the sun. She
undertook, however, to keep the matter to herself until Claude’s return, at the mention of whose name she begged to look at the cutting from the Parthenon.

“‘A most repulsive article,’” her mother informed Olivia after breakfast, but not until she had repeated to the girl the entire substance of the late conversation on the terrace. “I never read anything more venomously ill-bred in my life; and so untrue! To say he is no poet—our Claude! But who knows him, thank goodness we know better. It is the true poetry, not only in but between every line, that distinguishes dear Claude from the mere stringers of pretty rhymes of whom the papers sicken one in these latter days. But where are you going, my love?”

“To get ready to go with—Jack.”

“To go where, pray?”

“Why, to Devenholme, as we arranged last night,” replied Olivia, with spirit. “He said he would drive me over; and you said ‘how sweet of him,’ and beamed upon us both!”

Lady Caroline winced. “You impertinent chit!” she cried viciously; “you know as well
as I do that what I have told you alters everything. Once and for all, Olivia, I forbid you to drive into Devenholme with—with—with—that common man!"

"Very well; the drive's off," said the girl with swift decision; and she left her mother without another word.

She put on her habit and went straight to Jack.

"Do you mind if we ride into Devenholme instead of driving?"

"Mind! I should like it even better."

"Then suppose we go the stable-yard and see about our horses ourselves; and while we are there, we may as well stay and start by the back road, which will save at least a quarter of a mile."

"My oath," said Jack without further provocation, "you might have been dragged up in the bush!"

"I wish I had been!" exclaimed Olivia bitterly. He could not understand her tone. Nor did he ever know the meaning of the momentary fighting glitter in the brave brown eyes of the girl.

He rode as an inveterate bushman, entirely
on the snaffle, with inelegantly short stirrups and a regrettable example of the back-block bend; nor did his well-broken hack give him a chance of exhibiting any of the finer qualities of the rough-riding school. But indeed for the most part the couple sat at ease in their saddles, while the horses dawdled with loose reins and lazy necks in the cool shadows of the roadside trees. By mutual consent they had dispensed with an attendant groom. And Olivia had never been so kind to Jack, as on this day when he was under so black a cloud, with so heavy a seal upon his lips.

For once she talked to him; as a rule she liked better to listen, with large eyes intent and sympathetic lips apart—ever ready with the helpful word. But to-day she was wishful to entertain, to take him out of himself, to console without letting him suspect that she knew as much as he had told her mother. In a sense she knew more, for Lady Caroline had duly exaggerated his frank confession; and the girl's heart bled for her friend, on the brink of a disillusion without parallel in her knowledge. So she told him of her life in town and
elsewhere; of the treadmill round of toilsome pleasure; of the penance of dressing and smiling with unflagging prettiness; of the hollow friendships and hollower loves of that garish life, and the unutterable staleness of the whole conventional routine. No doubt she overstated her case; and certainly her strictures were themselves conventional; but she was perfectly aware of both facts, and would have been exceedingly sorry to have had this conversation recorded against her. Olivia had a healthy horror of superiority, either of the moral or the intellectual order. But she was conducting a conversation with an obvious purpose; and it was only when he told her again, and more earnestly than before, how suited she was for the bush, that she proposed the canter, which brought them a mile nearer Devenholme.

"Now it's you to play," she told him as they drew rein; "and I want to hear some of your adventures. You've never told us any, yet you must have had heaps. So far I've only heard about the hut, the sheep, the homestead and your old boss."
"A white man!" cried Jack. "I wish you knew him."

"So do I; but I can quite picture him, and just now I would much rather hear about some of your own adventures. So begin."

Jack laughed.

"Really, Miss Sellwood, I never had one in my life!"

"Then really, my Lord Duke, I can't believe a word——"

Jack was laughing no more.

"Don't call me that," he said. "It would be so much—kinder—to call me Jack!"

She had forgotten. Her heart smote her, and the difficulty was to conceal her unsuspected sympathy. So she insisted on his calling her Olivia, to conclude the bargain. And the double innovation made them both so self-conscious, that she forgot her thirst for his adventures, while he brooded heavily upon his bitter-sweet advancement too late.

So they came into Devenholme as the sun was shining fore and aft along the quaint old English streets. And in the town, where he was well enough known by this time, poor Jack
was received with a cruel consideration that would have hurt him even more than it did had he dreamt how it affected his companion. The tender-hearted girl was inexpressibly grieved, and never more than when the jeweller mentioned a hundred guineas as the price of the ring to be changed; indeed, the situation in the jeweller's shop was perilously charged with hidden emotions. In his terribly equivocal position, Jack could not press upon Olivia things for which he might never be able to pay; neither could Olivia now refuse any present at all, nor yet lead him as low as she would have liked in the price, for fear of revealing her illicit knowledge. So at last they hit upon a curb-bracelet that fastened with a tiny padlock. It cost but forty-five shillings. And when he had locked it upon her right wrist, he pocketed the key without a remark, then paid ready money and left the shop in a throbbing agony of shame. The poor jeweller stood bowing them out with the hundred-guinea ring still in his hand.