CHAPTER XV.

END OF THE INTERREGNUM.

Nobody was about when they dismounted, so Jack himself led the horses back to the stables, while Olivia gathered up her habit and scaled the steps. The stable clock struck five as the former was returning by way of the shrubbery; another seven hours and Claude would come home with the news. For such an issue it was still an eternity to wait. But Jack felt that the suspense would be easily endurable so long as he could have sight and speech of Olivia Sellwood; without her, even for these few minutes, it was hardly to be borne.

Yet this stage of his ordeal was made up of such minutes. He returned to desolate rooms. Olivia had disappeared; nor could he pitch upon a soul to tell him where she was. Door after door was thrown open in vain; each presented an empty void to his exacting eyes. He ran outside and stood listening on the
terrace. And there, through an open upper window, he heard a raised voice railing, which he could not but recognise as that of Lady Caroline. Her words were indistinguishable. But as Jack looked aloft for the window, one was passionately shut; and he neither heard nor saw any more.

The first persons he ultimately encountered were Mr. Sellwood and the agent. They had golf-clubs in their hands and wholesome sweat upon their brows. The agent treated Jack as usual; the Home Secretary did not. He stated that he had at last won a round; but his manner was singularly free from exultation; indeed, it was quite awkward, as though perfect cordiality had suddenly become a difficult matter, and he was ashamed to find it so. Certainly there had been no difficulty of the kind before. And Jack noted the change, but was too honourable himself to suspect the cause.

He next fell in with the Frekes. This excellent couple loved Jack for his goodness to their children, who were not universally popular. They now carried him off to tea in
the nursery, where he stayed until it was time to dress for dinner. Jack liked the children; it was not his fault that they were so seldom in evidence. They were obviously spoilt; but Jack thought they were taken too seriously by all but their parents, who certainly did not take them seriously enough. So he had many a romp with the little outcasts, but never a wilder one than this afternoon, for the children took him out of himself. Their society, had he but known it, was even better for him in the circumstances than that of Olivia herself; it was almost as good as another meeting with Dalrymple of Carara. He rose at length from under his oppressors, dusty, dishevelled and perspiring, but for the moment as light-hearted as themselves. And there were the grave, sympathetic eyes of the parents resting sadly upon him to recall his trouble. Why should they look sad or sympathetic? Everybody had changed towards him; this was the difference in the Frekes. Could they have divined the truth? No suspicion of a broken confidence entered his head; yet it was sufficiently puzzled as he dressed, with
unusual care, to make a creditable last appearance at the head of the table which would prove never to have been his at all. He had quite made up his mind to that; he found it appreciably harder to reconcile himself to the keen disappointment which awaited him in the dining-room.

Olivia was not coming down.

"She has knocked herself up," explained Lady Caroline tersely. "So would any girl—not an Australian—who rode so far on such a day. Your Grace might have known better!"

Jack stared at her like a wounded stag; then he uttered an abject apology, for which, however, he obtained no sort of a receipt. Lady Caroline had turned and was talking to someone else. But it was not this that cut him to the heart; it was her mode of addressing him, after their conversation of the early morning.

Later in the evening he remembered that railing voice and the shutting of the window upstairs; and with a burning indignation he divined, all at once, who it was that had been so
spoken to, and why, with the true cause of Olivia's indisposition.

This was in the darkness of his hut, with Livingstone asleep in his lap. In another minute Jack was striding through the pines, on his way to the drawing-room for a few plain words with Lady Caroline Sellwood. He never had them. Lady Caroline was gone to bed. It was almost eleven; within an hour Claude would be back, and a moral certainty become an absolute fact. Hunt's tale was true. Had it been otherwise, Claude would have telegraphed. He had left, indeed, on the distinct understanding that he should do no such thing; his mission was to be kept a secret, and a telegram might excite suspicion; yet even so he would have sent one had all been well. Jack was sure of it; his exhausted spirit had surrendered utterly to an ineluctable despair.

In this humour he sought the Poet's Corner, and found its two habitués furtively chuckling over some newspaper. Their gaiety cut him to the quick. Yet he longed to enter into it.
"What's the joke?" he asked. "I want something to make me laugh!"

"This wouldn't," replied Edmund Stubbs.

"It's not benign enough for you."

"It's only a piece of smart scribbling," explained Llewellyn, lighting a fresh cigarette with the stump of the last.

Jack was behind them; quite innocently he put his head between theirs and looked for himself. The paper was the Parthenon. There was but one article on the open page. It was headed—

OUR MINOR POETS:
XXVIII.—MR. CLAUDE LAFONT.

"So that amuses you?" said Jack at last.

"Quite," said Llewellyn.

"You think it just, eh?"

"Oh, hang justice! It's awfully nice copy. That's all it has any right to be. Justice doesn't matter a hang; the Parthenon's not written for the virtuous shopkeeper; it isn't meant to appeal to the Nonconformist Conscience."

"Besides, the article is just," protested Stubbs. "We know what Lafont is, between
ourselves; he's an excellent chap, but his poetry—save the mark!—would hardly impose on Clapham and Wandsworth. His manner's cheap enough, but his matter goes one cheaper; it's the sort of thing for which there should be no charge." Stubbs drained his glass.

Jack was blazing.

"I don't know what you mean by 'cheap,'" he cried; "but from reading that article, which I happen to have seen before, I should call it a jolly 'cheap' word. I don't set up to be a clever man. I only know what I like, and I like everything of Claude's that—that I can understand. But even if I didn't I should be sorry to go about saying so in his own house!"

"His own house!" exclaimed the Impressionist.

"We didn't know it was his," said Stubbs.

"What's mine is Claude's," replied Jack, colouring. "It was before I turned up, and it will be again when—whensoever I peg out."

With that he was gone.

"Sounds suicidal," remarked Llewellyn.

"Or celibate," said Stubbs, replenishing his glass.
“Poor beast!” concluded the artist.

Here their host returned.

“I’m very sorry, you fellows,” said he, with absurd humility. “I’m all off colour to-night, and I know I’ve made a rude ruffian of myself. Some of these days you’ll understand; meantime will you forgive me?”

“I have nothing to forgive,” replied Llewellyn.

“We’ll say no more about it,” said Stubbs.

And Jack shook hands with them both before leaving them for good; then he hurried through the length of the building to the great conservatory, where Stebbings was putting out the lights. The conservatory was at that extreme of the Towers which the dogcart would pass first. Here, too, was room and air for a man distraught. So Jack called out to Stebbings to leave the lights on longer.

“And light some more,” he added suddenly.

“Light up every lamp in the place! I shall stay here until Mr. Lafont returns.”

“Yes, your Grace.”

“Stebbens!”

“Your Grace?”
"For God's sake don't call me that again! I—I'm not used to it, Stebbings—any more than you're used to me," added Jack inconsequently; and he fled into the grounds until the old man should be gone.

The night was very dark and heavy; clouds obscured the moon, shedding a fine rain softly upon drive and terrace. Jack raised his face, and a grateful sprinkling cooled its fever. He longed for a far heavier fall, with the ancient longing of those prehistoric days when a grey sky and an honest wetting were the rarest joys in life. Could he indeed return to that rough routine after all these weeks of aristocratic ease? The bushman might exchange his wideawake for a coronet, but could the peer go back to the bush? Time must show. The only question was whether Hunt had lied or told the truth; and the answer could not be much longer delayed. Already it was half-past eleven; there was the clang creeping lazily through the night, round quarter of a mile of intervening wall, and half a hundred angles.

He would have gone down the drive to meet
the dogcart; but the night was too dark; and beside him blazed the great conservatory like a palace of fire. He entered it again, and now he had it to himself; the statues among the tree-ferns were his only companions. But in his absence old Stebbings had placed a little table with brandy and soda-water set out upon it; even the butler had seen and pitied his condition.

The third quarter struck. The sound just carried to the conservatory, for now the rain was heavier, and the rattle overhead warred successfully against all other noises. The dogcart might drive by without Jack's hearing it. The suspense was horrible, but a surprise would be more horrible still. He was becoming unstrung; why should he not tune himself up with the brandy? His voluntary teetotalism was too absurd; he had made no promise, taken no pledge, but only a private pride in his self-discipline as it had gone on from day to day. Not a drop had he touched since that afternoon at Dover so long, so long ago! As he reckoned up the time, the forgotten lust possessed him; it had been even so on Carara, when the periodical
need of a cheque would first steal over his lonely spirit. He thought now of those occasions and their results; he knew himself of old; but he was no longer the same man—resistance would be ridiculous now. He took another look at the night; then he filled a wine-glass with raw brandy—raised it—and impulsively dashed the whole upon the marble flags. The brandy widened in a shallow amber flood; the broken glass lay glittering under the lamps; and in Jack’s ears the patter of the rain (which had never abated) broke out anew.

He could not account for his act; he did not know it for the culmination of a highly nervous condition induced by twenty-four sleepless hours of unrelieved suspense. It was neither more nor less, and yet it enabled him to hold up his head once more. And as he did so, there—through the swimming crystal walls—between a palm-tree and a Norfolk Island pine—were the two red eyes of the dogcart dilating in the dark.

The great moment had come, and it was not so great after all. Jack’s little outburst had left him strangely calm. He went to the door and hailed the dogcart in a loud, cheery voice. The
lamps stopped. Claude came within range of those in the conservatory, and shook himself on the steps. Then he entered, looking unusually healthy, but dripping still.

"A brute of a night for you," said Jack, apologetically. "Take off that coat, and have some brandy. Mind where you go. I've had a spill."

This was the reaction. Claude understood.

"Then you don't want to hear the news?"

"I know it. I've known it for hours."

"That I can see you haven't. Listen to me. There was no English marriage. Give me your hand!"

It was limp and cold.

"You don't believe me!" said Claude, severely.

Jack subsided in a chair.

"I can't," he whispered. "I can't."

"You soon will. I wish to goodness I'd taken you with me to-day. Now listen: there was some truth in Hunt's story, but more lies. The marriage was a lie. There never was a marriage. There was something rather worse at the time, but a good deal better now. My grandfather patched it up, exactly as I thought. He
packed my uncle out to Australia, and he settled two hundred a year on the Hunts, on the single condition of 'perpetual silence as to the connection between the two families.' I've seen the covenant, and those are the very words. The condition has been broken after all these years. And the Hunts' income stops to-day."

Jack had roused himself a little; he was no longer apathetic, but neither was he yet convinced.

"It seems a lot of money to hush up so small a matter," he objected. "Are they sure there was no more in it than that?"

"Maitland and Cripps? Perfectly sure; they've been paying that money for nearly forty years, and there's never been a hint at a marriage until now. Certainly there's none in the settlement. But to make assurance surer, young Maitland took a cab and drove off to see his father—who was a partner in '53, but has since retired—about the whole matter. And I took another cab, and drove straight to the old parish church facing the river at Chelsea. I found the clerk, and he showed me the marriage register, but there was no such marriage on that date (or
any other) in that church: so why in any? One lie means dozens. Surely you'll agree with me there?"

"I must; it's only the money that sticks with me. It seems such a case of paying through the nose. But what had old Maitland to say?"

"Everything," cried Claude. "He remembered the whole business perfectly, and even saying to my grandfather much what you're saying to me now. But I've told you the kind of man the old Duke was; he was a purist of the purists, besides being as proud as Lucifer, and a scandal so near home hit him, as you would say, in both eyes at once. He considered he got good value for his money when he hushed it up. They showed me a letter in which he said as much. Young Maitland unearthed it after he had seen his father, and with it others of a later date, in which the Duke refused to revoke or even to curtail the allowance on the woman's death. That's all; but surely it's conclusive enough! Here we have a first-class firm of solicitors on the one hand, and a clumsy scoundrel on the other. Which do you believe? By the way, they're anxious to
prosecute Hunt on all sorts of grounds if you'll let them."

"I won't."

"I think you ought to," said Claude.

"No, no; too much mud has been stirred up already; we'll let it rest for a bit."

"But surely you'll get rid of the Hunts after this?"

"I'll see."

Claude was disappointed; he had looked for a different reception of his news.

"Do you mean to say you're not convinced yet?" he cried.

"No," said Jack, "I'm quite satisfied now; you hem the thing in on every side. But I wish to goodness all this had never happened!"

"So do we all; but if there was a doubt, surely it was best to set it at rest? If I were you I should feel as one does after a bad dream."

Jack was on his feet.

"My dear old mate," he cried, "and so I do! But I'm only half woke up; that's what's the matter with me, and you must give me time to pull myself together. You don't know what a
day I've had; you never will know. And you—my meat's your poison, and yet you've been doing all this for me just as if it was the other way round; and not a word of thanks at the end of it. Claude—old man—forgive me! Thanks won't do. They're no good at all in a case like this. What can a fellow say? If it was you, you'd say plenty——"

"I hope not," interrupted Claude, laughing. "Wait till you do me a good turn? You've done me many a one already, and I've never said a word."

But Jack would shake hands, and even Claude's face was shining with a tender light as a soft step fell upon the marble, and Lady Caroline Sellwood entered from the drawing-room. The door had been left open. But it was instantly evident that her Ladyship had not been eavesdropping, or at least not to any useful purpose; for she planted herself before the two men in obvious ignorance as to which was the man for her. She was still in the handsome dress that she had worn all the evening; and between her plump, white, glittering fingers she nursed the purple smoking-cap that had always
been—and was still—intended for the Duke of St. Osmund's.

"It was no good," she cried tragically, looking from Claude to Jack and back again at Claude. "I simply couldn't go to bed until I knew. And now—and now I'm torn two ways; for pity's sake put me out of one misery."

"It's all up," said Jack deliberately. He owed Lady Caroline a grudge for the shrill scolding he had heard upstairs, and another for Olivia's absence from the dinner-table. He was also curious to see what Lady Caroline would do.

She sailed straight to Claude, holding the smoking-cap at arm's length.

"My dear, dear Claude! How I congratulate you! I find, after all, that the smoking-cap, which was originally intended——"

"Dear Lady Caroline," interposed Claude hastily, "everything is as it was. Hunt's story is a complete fabrication; I'd no idea that you knew anything about it."

"I couldn't help telling Lady Caroline," said Jack. Lady Caroline turned upon him with hot suspicion.

"You said it was all——"
He interrupted her.

"I was going to say that it was all up with Hunt. He loses two hundred a year for his pains."

"Is that possible?" cried her Ladyship.

"It's the case," said Claude; "so everything is as it was, and as it should be."

Lady Caroline exhibited no further trace of her discomfiture.

"I wish we hadn't all interrupted each other," she laughed. "I was about to remark that the smoking-cap, which was originally intended to have what one may term a frieze, as well as a dado, of gold lace, will look much better without the frieze, so there's really no more to do to it. Take it, my dear, dear Jack, and wear it sometimes for my sake. And forgive a mother for what one said about Olivia's ride. Claude, I shall make another cap for you; meanwhile, let me congratulate you—again—on your noble conduct of to-day. Ah, you neither of you congratulate me on mine! Yet I am a woman, and I've kept your joint secret—most religiously—from nine in the morning to this very hour!"