CHAPTER XVII.

AN ANTI-TOXINE.

They rowed over, and were in mid-water when the landau drove up to the house. It had been sent in for Mr. Dalrymple early in the forenoon. They saw nothing, however, until they landed, when the equipage was proceeding on its way to the stables, having deposited the guest. At this discovery the Duke's excitement knew no bounds, so Olivia urged him to run on and leave her; and he took her advice, chiefly regretting that he had missed the proud moment of welcoming his old boss in the hall.

Jack regretted this the more when he reached the house. There was Dalrymple of Carara beginning his visit by roundly abusing the butler in the very portico! The guest was in a towering passion, the butler in a palsy of senile agitation; and between them on the step lay Dalrymple's Gladstone bag.

"What is the matter?" cried Jack, rushing
up with a very blank face. "Stebbings, what's this? What has he done, Mr. Dalrymple?"

"Refused to take in my bag! Says it's the footman's place!"

"Then what's he here for? The man must be drunk. Are you, Stebbings?"

The butler murmured an inarticulate reply.

"Get to your pantry, sir!" roared Jack.

"You shall hear more of this when you are sober. Old servant or new servant, out you clear!"

And he took up the bag himself, as Stebbings gave a glassy stare and staggered off without a word.

"I'm extremely sorry for losing my temper," said Dalrymple, taking Jack's arm as they entered the house; "but it always was rather short, as I fear I needn't remind you. Really, though, your disgraceful old retainer would have provoked a saint. Drunk as a fool in the middle of the day; drunk and insolent. Has the man been with you long?"

"Only fifty years or so with the family," replied Jack, savagely; "but, by the living Lord, he may roll up his swag!"

"Ah! I wouldn't be hasty," said Dalrymple.
"One must make allowances for one's old retainers; they're a privileged class. How good of you, by the way, to send in for me in such style! It prepared me for much. But I am bound to say it didn't prepare me for all this. No, I never should have pictured you in such an absolute palace had I not seen it with my own eyes!"

And now the visitor was so plainly impressed by all he saw, that Jack readily forgave him the liberty he had taken in rating Stebbings on his own account. Still the incident rankled. Dalrymple was the one man in the world before whom the Duke of St. Osmund's really did desire to play his new part creditably; and what could be said for a peer of the realm who kept a drunken butler to insult his guests? Jack could have shaken the old reprobate until the bones rattled again in his shrivelled skin. Dalrymple, however, seemed to think no more about the matter. He was entirely taken up with the suits of armour here in the hall: indeed Olivia discovered him lecturing Jack on his own trophies in a manner that would have led a stranger to mistake the guest for the host.
It may be said at once that this was Dalrymple's manner from first to last. It was that of the schoolmaster to whom the boy who once trembled at his frown is a boy for evermore. And it greatly irritated Jack's friends, though Jack himself saw nothing to resent.

The Duke led his guest into the great drawing-room, and introduced him with gusto to Lady Caroline Sellwood and to Claude Lafont. But all his pride was in the visitor, who, with his handsome cynical face, his distinguished bearing, and his faultless summer suit, should show them that at least one "perfect gentleman" could come out of Riverina. Jack waited a moment to enjoy the easy speeches and the quiet assurance of Dalrymple; then he left the squatter to Lady Caroline and to Claude. It was within a few minutes of the luncheon hour. Jack wanted a word with Stebbings alone. The more he thought of it, the less able was he to understand the old butler's extraordinary outburst. Could he have been ill instead of drunk? A charitable explanation was just conceivable to Jack until he opened the pantry door; it fell to the ground that moment; for not only did
he catch Stebbings in the act of filling a wine-glass with brandy, but the butler's breath was foul already with the spirit.

"Very well, my man," said Jack, slowly.
"Drink as much as you like! You'll hear from me when you're sober. But show so much as the tip of your nose in the dining-room, and I'll throw you through the window with my own hands!"

The upshot of the matter was indirect and a little startling; for this was the reason why Dalrymple of Carara took the head of his old hand's table at luncheon on the day of his arrival; and obviously it was Dalrymple's temporary occupation of that position, added to his unforgettable past relations with his host, which led him to behave exactly as though the table were his own.

A difficulty about the carving was the more immediate cause of the transposition. In the ordinary course, this was Stebbings's business, which he conducted on the sideboard with due skill; in his absence, however, the footmen had placed the dishes on the table; and as these included a brace of cold grouse, and neither
Jack nor Claude was an even moderate practitioner with the carving-knife, there was a little hitch. Mr. Sellwood was not present; he took his lunch on the links; and Jack made no secret of his relief when the squatter offered to fill the breach.

"Capital!" he cried; "you take my place, sir, and I wish you joy of the billet." And so the thing fell out.

It had the merit of seating the Duke and Olivia side by side; and the happy pair were made distinctly happier by the mutual discovery that neither had as yet confided in a third soul. At the foot of the table, in the position which Jack had begged her to assume at the outset of her visit, sat Lady Caroline Sellwood. The clever young men were on opposite sides, as usual; nor did they fail to exchange those looks of neglected merit and of intellectual boredom which were another feature of their public appearances. Their visit had not been altogether a success. It was a mystery why they prolonged it. They had been invited, however, to spend a month at Maske Towers, which, after all, was neither an uncomfortable
resting-place nor a discreditable temporary address.

Francis Freke said a Latin grace inaudibly, and then the squatter went to work at the birds. These were a present from afar; there were no moors "on" Maske, as Jack explained, with a proud eye on Dalrymple's knife. It flashed through the joints as though the bird had been already "boned"; on either side the breast fell away in creamy flakes; and Dalrymple talked as he carved, with the light touch and the easy grace of a many-sided man of the world. At first he seemed to join in everybody's conversation in turns; but he was only getting his team together; and in a little everybody was listening to him. Yet he talked with such tact that it was possible for all to put in their word; indeed, he would appeal first to one, then to another, so that the general temper of the party rose to a high level. Only Olivia and Claude Lafont felt that this stranger was taking rather much upon himself. Otherwise it was a pleasure to listen to him; he was excellently well informed; before the end of the meal it came out that he had actually read Claude's poems.
“And lived to tell the tale!” he added with characteristic familiarity. “I can tell you I felt it a risk after reading that terrible depreciation of you in the Parthenon; you see, I’ve been in England a few days, and have been getting abreast of things at my hotel while my tailors were making me externally presentable. By the way, I ran across a young Australian journalist who is over here now, and who occasionally scribbles for the Parthenon. I asked him if he knew who had made that scurrilous attack upon you, Mr. Lafont. I was interested, because I knew you must be one of Jack’s relations.”

“And did you find out?” inquired Claude, with pardonable curiosity.

“He found out for me. The culprit was a man of your name, Mr. Stubbs; no relation, I hope?”

“I hope not,” said Stubbs, emptying his glass; and his pallid complexion turned a sicklier yellow, as though his blood were nicotine, and the nicotine had mounted to his face.

“I should like to hear that name in full,” said Lady Caroline down the length of the table.

“I read the article myself. It was a disgrace to
journalism. It is only fair to our Mr. Stubbs that we should hear his namesake’s Christian name.”

“I think I can oblige,” said Dalrymple, producing his pocket-book. “His name was—ah! here it is! His name was Edmund. Edmund Stubbs!”

Edmund Stubbs was not unequal to the occasion. He looked straight at Jack.

“Will you kindly make it convenient to send me in to Devenholme in time for the next train?” he said. “If the Australian—gentleman—is going to stay in your house, I, for one, shall trespass no longer on your hospitality.”

“Nor I, for another!” Llewellyn chimed in.

And without further ceremony the mordant couple left the table and the room. Jack looked embarrassed, and Claude felt sorry for Jack. As for Olivia, she had felt vaguely indignant with Dalrymple ever since he had taken the head of the table; and this scene put a point to her feelings, while it also revived her first prejudice against the squatter. Lady Caroline, however, congratulated him upon an excellent piece of work.
"You have performed a public service, my dear Mr. Dalrymple," said she. "Dear Jack will, I know, forgive me when I say that those two young men have never been in their element here. They are all right in a London drawing-room, as representatives of a certain type. In a country house they are impossible; and, for my part, I shall certainly never send them another card."

Jack also was ceasing to disapprove of the humiliation of Edmund Stubbs, whose remarks overnight in the Poet’s Corner had suddenly recurred to his mind.

"Did you know it was the same man?" said he, pushing back his chair.

"I’m afraid I did," replied the squatter, as he rose. "They told me he was staying down here, and I could hardly avoid exposing the fellow. I hope, my dear Jack, that you will forgive the liberty I undoubtedly took in doing so. I am the germ that expels the other germs—a sort of anti-toxine in cuffs. *Similia similibus*, if my memory serves me, Mr. Lafont. Before long you may have to inject a fresh bacillus to expel me! Meantime, my dear
Jack, let me offer you a cigar to show there's no ill-feeling."

"No, thanks," said Jack, for once rather shortly; "you've got to smoke one of mine. It's my house!" he added, with a grin.

And the remark was much appreciated by those to whom it was not addressed; on Dalrymple it produced no effect at all.