CHAPTER XVIII.

HECKLING A MINISTER.

The engagement became known in the course of the afternoon, and the news was received in a manner after all very gratifying to the happy pair. Lady Caroline Sellwood did indeed insist on kissing her future son-in-law, but the obvious attitude she now assumed did not impose upon him for a moment. He had seen through her the night before; he could never believe in the woman again. In any case, however, her affectation of blank surprise, and her motherly qualms concerning the prospective loss of her ewe lamb, were a little over-acted, even for so inexperienced an observer as the Duke of St. Osmund's. She knew it, too, and hated Jack with all her hollow heart for having found her out; to him, it was, after this, a relief to listen to the somewhat guarded observations of Mr. Sellwood, whose feelings in the matter were just a little mixed.

Of the rest, Francis Freke volunteered his
services for the great event, and both he and his wife (who brought down her entire speaking family to say good-night to "Uncle Jack") were consumed with that genuine delight in the happiness of others which was their strongest point. Claude, too, was not only "very nice about it," as Olivia said, but his behaviour, in what was for him a rather delicate situation, showed both tact and self-control. Never for a moment did look or word of his suggest the unsuccessful suitor: though to be sure he had scarcely qualified for such a rôle. Olivia and he had never been more than friends. On her side, at least, the friendship had been of that perfectly frank and chronic character which is least likely to develop into love. And no one knew this better than Claude himself, who, moreover, was not even yet absolutely sure that his own undoubted affections were inspired by the divine impulse for which his poet's heart had so often yearned. At all events he had thought upon the one maiden for very many months; and putting it no higher than this, his present conduct was that of a tolerably magnanimous man.
The one person who raised an unsympathetic eyebrow was Dalrymple the squatter. He seemed surprised at the news, and, for the moment, rather annoyed; but Jack recalled the deplorably cynical view of women for which the owner of Carara had been quite notorious in the back-blocks, and the squatter's displeasure did not rankle. Nor was it expressed a second time. Either the sight of the pair together, who made no secret of their happiness; either this pretty spectacle, or the dictates of good taste, moved Dalrymple, ultimately, to the most graceful congratulations they had yet received. And it was characteristic of the man that his remarks took the form of an unsolicited speech at the dinner-table.

He had been only a few hours in the house, yet to all but Mr. Sellwood (who did not meet him until evening) the hours seemed days. For the squatter was one of those men who carry with them the weight of their own presence, the breath of an intrinsic power, subtly felt from the first; thus the little house-party had taken more notice of him in one afternoon than the normal stranger would have
attracted in a week; and to them it already seemed inevitable that he should lead and that they should follow whether they would or no. Accordingly, they were not in the least surprised to see Dalrymple on his legs when the crumb-cloth had been removed; though all but Jack deemed the act a liberty; and the squatter still adopted the tone of a master felicitating his men, rather than that of a guest congratulating his host.

Yet the speech was fluent and full of point; and the speaker himself made a sufficiently taking figure, leaning slightly forward, with the tips of his well-shaped fingers just resting on the black oak board that dimly reflected them. An unexceptionable shirt-front sat perfectly on his full, deep chest, a single pearl glistening in its centre; and there was a gleam of even teeth between the close-cropped, white moustache and the ugly, mobile, nether lip, whence every word fell distinct and clear of its predecessor. The Home Secretary had heard a worse delivery from his own front bench; and he was certainly interested in the story of the iron hut and the savages of Northern Queensland, which
Dalrymple repeated with the happiest effect. Olivia forgave him certain earlier passages on the strength of these; her heart was full; only she could not lift her eyes from the simple chain about her wrist, for they were dim. The speech closed with the dramatic climax of the tale; there had been but one interruption to the flow of well-chosen words, and that was when the speaker stopped to blow out a smoking candle without appealing to his host.

The health of the pair was then drunk with appropriate enthusiasm; poor Jack blurted out a few honest words, hardly intelligible from his emotion, and the three ladies left the room.

"There's one more point to that yarn," said Dalrymple, closing the door he had held open, "that I don't think you yourself are aware of, Jack. It was when you got back to the store, with your shirt burnt off your back, and the country in a blaze all round, that I first noticed the legend on your chest. As you probably know, Mr. Sellwood, the Duke has one of his own eagles tattooed upon his chest. I saw it that day for the first time. I felt sure it meant something. And years afterwards, when
I heard that a London solicitor was scouring the colonies for the unknown Duke of St. Osmund's, it was the sudden recollection of that mark which made me to some extent the happy instrument of his discovery."

"To every extent!" cried Jack, wringing his benefactor's hand. "I've always said so. Mr. Sellwood, I owe him everything, and yet he makes a song about my scaring away a few blackfellows with a bush-fire! By the hokey, I've a good mind to have him live happily with us ever after for his pains!"

The Home Secretary bent his snowy head: his rosy face was the seat of that peculiarly grim expression with which political caricaturists have familiarised the world. Dalrymple's light eyes twinkled like polished flints; here was high game worthy of his gun. He took the empty chair on Mr. Sellwood's left.

"I understand, sir, that you are fatally bitten with golf?" began the squatter in his airiest manner.

The other lit a cigarette with insolent deliberation before replying.
"I'm fond of the game," he said at length, "if that's what you mean."

"That was precisely what I did mean. Pardon me if I used an unparliamentary expression. I have read a great deal in your English papers—with which I never permit myself to lose touch—of the far-reaching ravages of the game. Certainly the disease must be widespread when one finds a Cabinet Minister down with the—golf!"

"We don't pronounce the l," Mr. Sellwood observed. "We call it goff." For though in political life an imperturbable temper was one of his most salient virtues, the Home Secretary was notoriously touchy on the subject of his only game.

Dalrymple laughed outright.

"A sure symptom, my dear sir, of a thoroughly dangerous case! But pray excuse my levity; I fear we become a little too addicted to chaff in the uncivilised wilds. I am honestly most curious about the game. I'm an old fogey myself, and I might like to take it up if it really has any merits—"

"It has many," put in Claude cheerily, to
divert an attack which Mr. Sellwood was quite certain to resent.

"Has it?" said the squatter incredulously. "For the life of one I can't see where those merits come in. To lay yourself out to hit a sitting ball! I'd as soon shoot a roosting hen!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Jack. "That's exactly what I say, Mr. Dalrymple."

The discussion had in fact assumed the constituent elements of a "foursome"; which may have been the reason why the Home Secretary was unable any longer to maintain the silence of dignified disdain.

"I should like to take you out, the two of you," he said, "with a driver and a ball between you. I should like to see which of you would hit that sitting ball first, and how far!"

"We'll take you on to-morrow!" exclaimed Jack.

But the Home Secretary made no reply.

"I'm not keen," remarked Dalrymple. "It can't be a first-class game."

"You're hardly qualified to judge," snapped Sellwood, "since you've never played."
"Exactly why I am qualified. I'm not down with the disease."

"Then pray let us adopt the Duke's suggestion, and play a foursome to-morrow—like as we sit. Eh, Mr.—I beg your pardon, but I quite forget your name?"

"Dalrymple," replied the squatter; "and yours, once more?"

"Look in Whitaker," growled the Home Secretary, rising; and he left the table doubly angered by the weakness of his retort, where indeed it was weak to have replied at all.

Decidedly the squatter was no comfortable guest. Apart from his monstrous freedom of speech and action, which might pass perhaps on a bush station, but certainly not in an English country house, he was continually falling foul of somebody. Now it was the butler, now a fellow guest, and lastly a connection of his host, and one of Her Majesty's Ministers into the bargain. In each case, to be sure, the other side was primarily in the wrong. The butler was the worse for drink; the Parthenon man had indulged in gratuitous abuse of his friend; even Mr. Sellwood had taken amiss what was meant
as pure chaff, and had been the first to begin the game of downright rudeness at which the old Australian had soon beaten him. Yet the fact remained that Dalrymple was the moving spirit in each unpleasantness; he had been a moving spirit since the moment he set foot in the house—and this was exactly what the other guests resented. But it was becoming painfully apparent that Jack himself would take nothing amiss; that he was constitutionally unable to regard Dalrymple in any other light than that of his old king who could still do no wrong. And this being so, it was impossible for another to complain.

Indeed, when Mr. Sellwood joined the ladies who happened to be in the conservatory, with savage words upon his lips, his wife stuck up for the maligned colonist. That, however, was partly from the instinct of conjugal opposition, and partly because Lady Caroline was herself afraid of "this fellow Dalrymple," as her husband could call him fluently enough behind his back. The other men were not long in joining the indignant Minister. They had finished their cigarettes, but Jack had donned
his gorgeous smoking-cap by special request of Lady Caroline, who beamed upon him and it from her chair.

"Hallo! have you come in for that thing?" exclaimed Mr. Sellwood, who was in the mood to hail with delight any target for hostile criticism. "I always thought you intended it for Claude, my dear Caroline?"

"It turned out to be a little too small for Claude," replied her Ladyship sweetly.

"Claude, you've had an escape," said the Home Secretary. "Jack, my boy, you have my sympathy."

"I don't require it, thank you, sir," laughed the Duke. "I'm proud of myself, I tell you! This'd knock 'em up at Jumping Sandhills, wouldn't it, Mr. Dalrymple?"

"It would indeed: so the cap goes with the coronet, does it?" added the squatter, but with such good humour that it was impossible to take open umbrage at his words. "I wonder how it would fit me?" And he lifted the thing off Jack's head by the golden tassle, and dropped it upon his own.

"Too small again," said Jack: indeed the
purple monstrosity sat upon the massive hairless head like a thimble on a billiard-ball.

"And it doesn't suit you a bit," added Olivia, who was once more in a simmer of indignation with her lover's exasperating friend.

"No more would the coronet," replied Dalrymple, replacing the smoking-cap on its owner's head. "By the way, Jack, where do you keep your coronet?"

"Where do I keep my coronet?" asked the Duke of his major-domo. "I've never set eyes on it."

"I fancy they have it at the bank," said Claude.

"And much good it does you there!" exclaimed Dalrymple. "Shall I tell you what I'd do with it if it were mine?"

"Yes, do," said Jack, smiling in advance.

"Then come outside and you shall hear I am afraid I have shocked your friends sufficiently for one night. And there's a very fascinating moon."