CHAPTER XIX.

THE CAT AND THE MOUSE.

"You're a lucky fellow," said the squatter as they sauntered down the drive. "Give me another of those cigars; they are better than mine, after all."

"They ought to be," replied Jack complacently. "I told old Claude to pay all he could for 'em."

"He seems to have done so. What an income you must have!"

"About fifteen bob a minute, so they tell me."

"After a pound a week in the bush!"

"It does sound rummy, doesn't it? After you with the match, sir."

"It's incredible."

"Yet it's astonishing how used you get to it in time—you'd be surprised! At first the whole thing knocked me sideways; it was tucker I couldn't digest. But once you take to the soft tack, there's nothing like it in
the world. You may guess who's made me take to it quicker than I might have done!"

Dalrymple shrugged his massive shoulders, and raised a contemplative eye to the moon, that lay curled like a silver shaving in the lucid heavens.

"Oh, yes, I can guess," he said sardonically. "And mind you I've nothing against the girl—I meant you were lucky there. The girl's all right—if you must marry. I don't dislike a woman who'll show fight; and she looked like showing it when I tried on that cracker-nightcap thing of yours. Oh, certainly! if you were to marry, you couldn't have done better; the girl's worth fifty of her mother, at any rate."

"Fifty million!" cried Jack, somewhat warmly.

"Fifty million I meant to say," and the squatter ran his arm through that of his host. "Come, don't you mind me, Jack, my boy! You know what an old heathen I am in those little matters; and we have lots of other things to talk about, in any case."

Jack was mollified in a moment.
“Lots!” he cried. “I don’t seem to have seen anything of you yet, and I’m sure you haven’t seen much of the place. Isn’t it a place and a half? Look at the terrace in the moonlight—and the spires—and the windows—hundreds of ’em—and the lawn and the tank! Then there’s the inside; you’ve seen the hall; but I must show you the picture gallery and the State Apartments. Such pictures! They say it’s one of the finest private collections in the world; there’s hardly one of them that isn’t by some old master or another. I’ve heard the pictures alone are worth half a million of money!"

“They are,” said Dalrymple.

“You’ve heard so too?”

“Of course; my good fellow, your possessions are celebrated all the world over; that’s what you don’t appear to have realised yet.”

“I can’t,” said Jack. “It puts me in a sick funk when I try! So it would you if you were suddenly to come in for a windfall like mine—that is, if you were a chap like me. But you aren’t; you’d be the very man for the billet.”

And Jack stepped back to admire his hero,
who chuckled softly as he smoked, standing at his full height, with both hands in his pockets, and the moon like limelight on his shirt.

"It's not a billet I should care about," said the squatter; "but it's great fun to find you filling it so admirably—"

"I don't; I wish I did," said Jack, throwing away the cigar which he had lighted to keep his guest company.

"You do, though. And if it isn't a rude question"—Dalrymple hesitated, staring hard—"I daresay you're very happy in your new life?"

"Of course I'm very happy now. None happier!"

"But apart from the girl?"

"You can't get apart from her; that's just it. If I'm to go on being happy in my position, I'll have to learn to fill it without making myself a laughing-stock; and the one person who can teach me will be my wife."

"I see. Then you begin to like your position for its own sake?"

"That's so," replied Jack. He was paring a cake of very black tobacco for the pipe which
he had stuck between his teeth. Dalrymple watched him with interest.

"And yet," said the squatter, "you have neither acquired a taste for your own most excellent cigars, nor conquered your addiction to the vile twist we used to keep on the station!"

"Well, and that's so, too," laughed Jack. "You must give a fellow time, Mr. Dalrymple!"

"Do you know what I thought when I met you yesterday?" continued Dalrymple, turning his back to the moon, and looking very hard at Jack while he sucked at his cigar with his thick, strong lips. "Do you know how you struck me then? I thought you'd neither acquired a taste for your new life nor conquered your affection for the old. That's how you struck me in Devenholme yesterday."

Jack made no haste to reply. He was not at all astonished at the impression he had created the day before. But his old boss was still the one man before whom he was anxious to display a modicum of dignity, even at the expense of a pose. And it is noteworthy that he had neither confided in Dalrymple concerning his dilemma of the previous day, nor yet
so much as mentioned in his hearing the model hut among the pines.

"I don't wonder," he said at length; "it was the way I was likely to strike you just then. Don't you see? I hadn't got it out at the time!"

"So it was only the girl that was on your nerves?" said Dalrymple in disgust.

"And wasn't that enough? If I'm a different man to-day, you know the reason why. As for being happy in my position, and all that, I'm simply in paradise at this moment. Think of it! Think of me as I was, and look at me as I am; think of my little hut on Carara, and look behind you at Maske Towers!"

They were on the terrace now, leaning idly against the balustrade. Dalrymple turned and looked: like Melrose Abbey, the grand grey building was at its best in the "pale moon-light"; the lichen-ened embrasures met the soft sky softly; the piercing spires were sheathed in darkness; and the mountainous pile wore one uniform tint, from which the lighted windows stood out like pictures on a wall. Dalrymple looked, and looked again; then his hard eyes
fell upon the rude ecstasy of the face beside him; and they were less hard than before.

"You may make yourself easy," said the squatter. "I shan't stay long."

"What the blazes do you mean?" cried Jack. "I want you to stay as long as ever you can."

"You may; your friends do not."

"Hang my friends!"

"I should enjoy nothing better, but it isn't practicable. Besides, they're a good deal more than your friends now; they are—her people. And they don't like the man who was once your boss; he offends their pride—"

"Mr. Dalrymple—"

"Enough said, my boy. I know my room, and I'm going to turn in. We'll talk it over again in the morning; but my mind is made up. Good-night!"

"I'll come in with you."

"As you like."

They parted at the visitor's door.

"You'll disappoint me cruel if you do go," said Jack, shaking hands. "I'm quite sure you're mistaken about my friends; Olivia, for
one, thinks no end of you. However, as you say, we can talk it over in the morning—when you've got to see the pictures as well, and don't you forget it! So long, sir, till then."

"So long, Jack. I'll be your man in the morning, at all events. And I shall look forward to a great treat in your famous picture gallery."

But Jack was engaged; and he realised it in the morning as he had not done before. Olivia lured him from the squatter's side; she had every intention of so doing. The pair went for a little stroll. Neither wore a watch; the little stroll lengthened into miles; it carried them beyond the sound of the stable clock; they forgot the world, and were absurdly late for lunch. Lady Caroline Sellwood had taken it upon herself to conduct the meal without them. Dalrymple was in his place; his expression was grimly cynical; he had seen the pictures, under Claude Lafont's skilled escort, and, with the ladies' permission, he would now leave the table, as he had still to put in his things.
His things! Was he going, then? Jack's knife and fork fell with a clatter.

"I thought you knew," said Claude. "He is going up to town by the afternoon train. I have ordered the landau, as I thought you would like him to go as he came."

When Jack heard this he, too, left the table, and bounded upstairs. He found Dalrymple on the point of packing his dress-clothes. with the assistance of none other than Stebbings. Jack glared at the disrated butler, and ordered him out of the room.

"I wouldn't have done that," remarked the squatter, pausing in his work. "The fellow came to know if he could do anything for me, with tears in his eyes, and he has made me a handsome apology. He didn't ask me to beg him off, but I mean to try my luck in that way before I go."

"You mustn't go!"

"I must. Will you forgive the old man?"

"Not if you clear."

"My good fellow, this is unreasonable——"

"So it is, Mr. Dalrymple, on your part," rejoined Jack, warmly. "It's too bad of you.
Bother Stebbings! I shan't be hard on him, you may be sure; and you mustn't be hard on me. Surely you can make allowances for a chap who's engaged to a girl like mine? I did want to speak to you this morning; but she came first. I want to speak to you now—more than you suppose. Mr. Dalrymple, I wasn't straight with you last night; not altogether. But I can't suffer steering crooked; it gives me the hump; and as sure as I do it I've got to go over the ground again. You are the man I owe my all to; I can't end up crooked with you!"

Dalrymple sat on the bedside in his shirt-sleeves; he had turned up the cuffs; his strong and shapely wrists lay along his thighs; and his grey eyebrows, but not his lips, asked for more.

"I mean," continued Jack, "about what was bothering me that day I ran against you in Devenholme. It was only the day before yesterday, but Lord! it seems like the week before last."

And with that he unfolded, with much rapid detail, the whole episode of Matthew
Hunt, from the morning in the stable-yard to the midnight at the hut. The story within that story was also told with particular care and circumstance; but long before the end was reached Dalrymple had emptied his bag upon the bed, and had himself rung to countermand the carriage. He was interested; he would stay another day.

Downstairs in the drawing-room the Sellwood family and Claude Lafont were even then congratulating themselves upon the imminent departure of the unpopular guest. Their faces were so many sights when Jack entered in the highest spirits to tell them of his successful appeal to the better feelings of “good old Dalrymple,” who after all was not going to leave them just yet. Jack was out again in an instant; and they next saw him, from the drawing-room windows, going in the direction of the hut with his odious old friend at his side. Whereupon Claude Lafont said a strong thing, for him; and the most sensible of engaged young women retired in tears to her room.

“There’s one thing you must let me do,”
Dalrymple was saying; "if you don't, I shall insist. You must let me have the privilege of sorting that scoundrel, Mark Hunt."

"Matthew," said Jack.

"Matthew, then. I knew it was one of you evangelists."

"What would you do?" asked the Duke.

"See that he annoyed you no more. And I'll guarantee that he doesn't if you'll leave him to me."

"I didn't want to clear them out—"

"I think you must."

"Or to prosecute; it's so public, and a bit revengeful too."

"There I agree with you. I'm not even sure that you'd get a conviction. It would be difficult, in any case, and would make a public scandal of it, as you say."

"Then I will leave him to you. You're the smartest man I know, Mr. Dalrymple, and always have been. What you do will be right. I'll bother my head no more about it. Besides, anything to keep you with us a few days longer!"

Dalrymple shrugged his shoulders, but Jack
did not see the gesture, for he was leading the way through the pines. A moment later they were at the hut.

The hut amused the squatter. He called it a colourable imitation. But it did not delight him as it had delighted Jack; the master bushman failed to share his old hand's sentimental regard for all that pertained to the bush. Dalrymple sat on the bunk and smoked a cigar, a cynical spectator of some simple passages between Jack and his cats. Livingstone was exhibited with great pride; he had put on flesh in the old country; at which the squatter remarked that had he stayed on Carara he would have put on an ounce of lead.

"You're a wonderful man, Jack!" he exclaimed at length. "I wouldn't have believed a fellow could take a windfall as you have done, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. I used to think of you a good deal after you had gone. I thought of you playing the deuce to any extent, but I must say I little dreamt of your building a bush hut to get back to your old way of life! I pictured the
And he looked round the hut in his amused, sardonic way; but there was a ring—or perhaps it was only a suspicion—of disappointment in his tone. The next words were merely perplexed.

"And yet," added Dalrymple, "you profess yourself well pleased with your lot!"

"So I am—now."

"I begin to wish I hadn't changed my mind about going this afternoon."

"Why, on earth?"

"Because I also begin—to envy you! Come, let's make tracks for the house; I shall have huts enough to look at when I go back to the place that you need never see again."

"But I mean to see it again," said Jack as he locked up. "I intend to take my wife out, one of these days; we shall expect to come on a long visit to Carara; and the greatest treat you could give me would be to let me ride my old boundaries and camp in my old hut for a week!"

"Nonsense; you stay where you are," was
the squatter’s only comment. He seemed de­pressed; his cynical aplomb had quite deserted him. They returned in silence to the house.

A shabby-looking vehicle stood in front of the porch; the man said that he had brought a gentleman from Devenholme, and was to wait. The Duke and Dalrymple mounted the steps together. The first person they encountered in the hall was Claude Lafont, looking strangely scared; but a new-comer was in the act of taking off his coat; and, as he turned his face, Dalrymple and Jack started simultaneously. Both knew the man. It was Cripps the lawyer. And he, too, looked pale, nervous, and alarmed.