CHAPTER II.

"HAPPY JACK."

A dilettante in letters, a laggard in love, and a pedant in much of his speech, Claude Lafont was nevertheless possessed of certain graces of the heart and head which entitled him at all events to the kindly consideration of his friends. He had enthusiasm, and some soul; he had an open hand and an essentially simple mind. These were the merits of the man. They were less evident than his foibles, which, indeed, continually obscured them. He would have been the better for one really bad fault: but nature had not salted him with a single vice.

Unpopular at Eton, he had found his feet perhaps a little too firmly at Oxford. There his hair had grown long and his views outrageous. Had the old Duke of St. Osmund's been in his right mind at the time, he would certainly have quitted it at the report of some of his grandson's contributions to the university.
debates. Claude, however, had the courage of his most extravagant opinions, and even at Oxford he was a man whom it was possible to respect. The era of Toynbee Hall and a gentlemanly, kid-gloved Socialism came a little later; there were other and intermediate phases, into which it is unnecessary to enter. Claude came through them all with two things, at least, as good as new: his ready enthusiasm and his excellent heart.

Whether he really did view the new twist in his life with the satisfaction which he professed, is an open and immaterial question; all that is certain or important is the fact that he did not permit himself to repine. He was never in better spirits than in the six weeks' interval between the receipt of Mr. Cripps's cable and that gentleman's arrival with the new Duke. Claude divided the time between the proofs of his new volume of poems and conscientious preparations for the proper reception of his noble cousin. He had the mansion in Belgrave Square, which had fallen of late years into disuse, elaborately done up, re-papered, and fitted throughout with new hangings and
the electric light. He felt it his duty to hand over the house in a cleanly and habitable state; and he was accustomed to work his duty rather hard. He ran down to Maske Towers, the principal family seat, repeatedly, and had certain renovations carried out as far as possible under his own eye. In every direction he did more than he need have done. And so the time passed very busily, quite happily, and with an interest that was kept green to the past by the utter absence of any shred of information concerning the ninth Duke of St. Osmund's.

Claude had even no idea as to whether he was a married man. So he legislated for a wife and family. And his worst visions were of a hulking, genial, sheep-farming Duke, with a tribe of very terrible little Lords and Ladies, duly frightened of their gigantic father, but paying not the slightest attention to the anæmic Duchess who all day scolded them through her freckled nose.

Mr. Cripps's letters continued to arrive by each week's mail; but they were still written with a shake of the head and a growing
deprecation of the wild-goose chase in which the lawyer now believed himself to be unworthily engaged. Towards the end of May, however, the letters stopped. The last one was written on the eve of an expedition up the country, on a mere off-chance, to find out more about one John Dillamore, whom Mr. Cripps had heard of as a resident of the Riverina. Claude Lafont knew well what had come of that off-chance. It had turned the tide of his life. But no letter came from the Riverina; the next communication was a telegram from Brindisi, saying they had left the ship and were travelling overland; and the next after that, another telegram stating the hour at which they hoped to land at Dover.

Claude Lafont had just time enough to put on his hat, to stop the hansom for an instant at the house in Belgrave Square, and to catch the 12.0 from Victoria.

It was a lovely day in early June. There was neither a cloud in the sky nor the white crest of a wave out at sea; the one was as serenely blue as the other; and the Calais-Douvres rode in with a high-bred calm and
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dignity all in key with the occasion. Claude boarded her before he had any right, with a sudden dereliction of his characteristic caution. And there was old Cripps, sunburnt and grim, with a soft felt hat on his head, and a strange spasmodic twitching at the corners of the mouth.

“Here you are!” cried Claude, gripping hands. “Well, where is he?”

The lawyer’s lips went in and out, and a rough-looking bystander chuckled audibly.

“One thing quickly,” whispered Claude: “is he a married man?”

“No, he isn’t.”

The bystander laughed outright. Claude favoured him with a haughty glance.

“His servant, I presume?”

“No,” said Cripps, hoarsely. “I must introduce you. The Duke of St. Osmund’s—your kinsman, Mr. Claude Lafont.”

Claude felt the painful pressure of a horny fist, and gasped.

“Proud to meet you, mister,” said the Duke.

“So delighted to meet and welcome you, Duke,” said Claude, faintly.

“I’m afraid I’m a bit of a larrikin,” continued
the Duke. "You'd have done as well to leave me where I was—but now I'm here you've got to call me Jack."

"You knew, of course, what would happen sooner or later?" said Claude, with a sickly smile.

"Not me. My colonial oath, I did not! Never dreamt of it till I seen him"—with a jerk of his wide-awake towards Mr. Cripps. It was a very different felt hat from that gentleman's; the crown rose like a sugar-loaf, nine inches from the head; the brim was nearly as many inches wide; and where the felt touched the temples it was stained through and through with ancient perspiration.

"And I can't sight it now!" added his Grace.

"Nevertheless it's true," said Mr. Cripps.

Claude was taking in the matted beard, the peeled nose, and the round shoulders of the ninth Duke. He was a bushman from top to toe.

"What luggage have you?" exclaimed Claude, with a sudden effort. "We must get it ashore."
"This is all," said the Duke with a grin.

It lay on the deck at their feet: a long cylinder whose outer case was an old blue blanket, very neatly rolled and strapped; an Australian saddle, with enormous knee-pads, black with age; and an extraordinary cage like a rabbit-hutch. The cage was full of cats. The Duke insisted on carrying it ashore himself.

"This is the man?" whispered Claude, jealously, to Mr. Cripps.

"The man himself; there's an eagle on his chest as large as life."

"But it might be a coincidence——"

"It might be, but it isn't," replied Cripps shortly. "He's the Duke all right; the papers I shall show you are quite conclusive. I own he doesn't look the part. He's not tractable. He would come as he is. I heaved one old hat overboard; but he had a worse in his swag. However, no one on board knew who he was. I took care of that."

"God bless you, Cripps!" said Claude Lafont. He had reserved a first-class carriage. The Duke took up half of it with his cat-cage, which he stoutly declined to trust out of his sight. There
were still a few minutes before the train would start. Claude and Cripps exchanged sympathetic glances.

"I think we ought to drink the Duke's health," said Claude, who for once felt the need of a stimulant himself.

"I think so too," said Mr. Cripps.

"Then make 'em lock the door," stipulated his Grace. "I wouldn't risk my cats being shook, not for drinks as long as your leg!"

A grinning guard came forward with his key. The Duke "mistered" him, and mentioned where his cats came from as he got out.

"Very kind of you to shout for me," he continued as they filed into the refreshment room. "but why the blazes don't you call me Jack? Happy Jack's my name, that's what they used to call me up the bush. I'm not going to stop being Jack, or happy either, 'cause I'm a Dook; if I did I'd jolly soon sling it. Now, my dear, what are you givin' us? Why don't you let me help myself, like they do up the bush? English fashion, is it? And you call that drop a nobbler, do you, in the old country? Well, well, here's fun!"
The Duke's custodians were not sorry to get him back beside the cats. They were really glad when the train started. The Duke was in high spirits. The whisky had loosened his tongue.

"Like cats, old man?" he inquired of Claude. "Then I hope you'll make friends with mine. They were my only mates, year in, year out, up at the hut. I wasn't going to leave 'em there when they'd stood by me so long; not likely; so here they are. See that black 'un in the corner? I call her Black Maria, and that's her kitten. She went and had a large family at sea, but this poor little beggar's the only one what lived to tell the tale. That great big Tom, he's the father. I don't think much of Tom, but it would have been a shame to leave him behind. No, sir, my favourite's the little tortoise-shell with the game leg. He got cotched in a rabbit trap last shearing-time; he's the most adventurous little cat that ever was, so I call him Livingstone. I've known him explore five miles from the hut, when there wasn't a drop of water or a blade of feed in the paddicks, and yet come back as fat as butter. A little caution, I tell you! Out you come, Livingstone!"
Claude thought he had never seen a more ill-favoured animal. To call it tortoise-shell was to misuse the word. It was simply yellow; it ran on three legs; and its nose had been recently scarified by an enemy's claws.

"No, I'm full up of Tom," pursued the Duke, fondling his pet. "Look what he done on board to Livingstone's nose! I nearly slung him over the side. Poor little puss, then, poor little puss! You may well purr, old toucher; there's a live Lord scratching your head."

"Meaning me?" said Claude, genially; there was a kindness in the rugged face, as it bent over the little yellow horror, that appealed to the poet.

"Meaning you, of course."

"But I'm not one."

"You're not? What a damned shame! Why, you ought to be a Dook. You'd make a better one than me!"

The family solicitor was half-hidden behind that morning's Times; as Jack spoke, he hid himself entirely. Claude, for his part, saw nothing to laugh at. The Duke's face was earnest. The Duke's eyes were dark and kind.
Like Claude himself, he had the long Lafont nose, though sun and wind had peeled it red; and a pair of shaggy brown eyebrows gave strength at all events to the hairy face. Claude was thinking that half-an-hour at Truefitt's, a pot of vaseline, and the best attentions of his own tailors in Maddox Street, would make a new man of Happy Jack. Not that his suit was on a par with his abominable wideawake. He could not have worn these clothes in the bush. They were obviously his best; and, as obviously, ready-made.

Happy Jack was meantime apostrophising his pet.

"Ah! but you was with me when that there gentleman found me, wasn't you, Livingstone? You should tell the other gentleman about that. We never thought we was a Dook, did we? We thought ourselves a blooming ordinary common man. My colonial oath, and so we are! But you recollect that last bu'st of ours, Livingstone? I mean the time we went to knock down the thirty-one pound cheque what never got knocked down properly at all. We had a rare thirst on us."
Mr. Cripps in his corner smacked down the *Times* on his knees.

"Look there!" he cried. "Did ever you see such grass as that, Jack? You've nothing like it in New South Wales. I declare it does my old heart good to see an honest green field again!"

Jack looked out for an instant only.

"Ten sheep to the acre," said he. "Wonderful, isn't it, Livingstone? And you an' me used to ten acres to the sheep! But we were talking about that last little spree; you want your Uncle Claude to hear all about it, I see you do; you're not the cat to make yourself out better than what you are; not you, Livingstone! Well, as I was saying——

"Those red-tiled roofs are simply charming!" exclaimed the solicitor.

"A perfect poem," said Claude.

"And that May-tree in full bloom!"

"A living lyric," said Claude.

It was really apple-blossom.

"And you," cried the Duke to his cat, "you're a comic song, that's what you are! Tell 'em you won't be talked down, Livingstone. Tell this
gentleman he's got to hear the worst. Tell him that when the other gentleman found us"—the solicitor raised his Times with a shrug—"one of us was drunk, drunk, drunk; and the other was watching over him—and the other was my little cat!"

"You're joking, of course?" said Claude, with a flush.

"Not me, mister. That's a fact. You see, it was like this"——

"Thanks," said Claude, hastily; "but I'd far rather not know."

"Why not, old toucher?"

"It would hurt me," said Claude, with a shudder.

"Hurt you! Hear that, Livingstone? It would hurt him to hear how we knocked down our last little cheque! That's the best one I've heard since I left the ship!"

"Nevertheless it's the case."

"And do you mean to tell me you were never like that yourself?"

"Never in my life."

"Well, shoot me dead!" whispered the Duke in his amazement.
“It ought not to surprise you,” said Claude, in a tone that set the Times shaking in the far corner of the carriage.

“It does, though. I can’t help it. You’re the first I’ve ever met that could say as much.”

“Pray let us drop the subject. I prefer to hear no more. You pain me more than I can say!”

Claude’s flush had deepened; his supersensitive soul was indeed scandalised, and so visibly that an answering flush showed upon the Duke’s mahogany features, like an extra coat of polish.

“I pain you!” he echoed, dropping his cat. “I’m very sorry then. I am so! I had no intention of doing any such thing. All I wanted was to fly my true flag at once, like, and have done with it. And I’ve pained you; and you bet I’ll go on paining you all the time! How can I help it? I’m not what us back-blockers call a parlour-man, though I may be a Dook; but neither the one nor the other is my fault. You should have let me be in the bush. I was all right there—all right with my hut and my cats. I’d never known anything better. I never knew who I was. What did it matter if I knocked
down my cheque when I got full up of the cats and the hut? Nobody thinks anything of that up the bush. The boss used always to take me on again; some day I'll tell you about my old boss; he was the best friend ever I had. A real gentleman, who thought no worse of you so long's it only happened now and then. But see here! It shall never happen again. It didn't matter in the boundary rider, but p'r'aps it might in the Dook. Anyhow I'm strict TT from this moment; that whisky at Dover shall be my last. And I'm dammed sorry I pained you, and—and dash it, here's my fist on it for good and all!"

It is difficult to say which hand wrung the harder. Claude was not pleased with himself; the conscious lack of some quality, which the other possessed, was afflicting him with a novel and entirely unexpected sense of inferiority. He was as yet unsure what the missing quality was; he hardly suspected it of being a virtue; but it was new to Claude to have these feelings at all.

He said not another word upon the embarrassing subject, but fell presently into a train of thought that kept him silent until they steamed into Victoria. There the conquering
Cripps was met by his wife and daughters; but Claude managed to get a few more words with him as they were waiting to have the baggage passed.

"I like him," said Claude.

"So do I," was the reply, "and I know him well."

"I like his honesty."

"He is honesty itself. I did my best just now to keep him from giving himself away—but that was his deliberate game. Mark you, what he insisted on telling you was quite true; but on the whole he has behaved excellently ever since."

"Well, as long as he doesn't confess his sins to everybody he meets!"

"No fear of that; he looks on you as still the head of the family, with a sort of ex officio right to know the worst. His own position he doesn't realise a bit. Yet some day I expect to see him at least as fit to occupy it as one or two others; and you are the man to make him so. You will only require two things."

The great doors opened inwards, and the travellers surged in to claim their luggage, with
Mr. Cripps at their head. Claude caught him by the elbow as he was pointing out his trunks.

"Those two things?" said he.

"Yes, those two, with my initials on each."

"No, but the two things that I shall need?"

"Oh, those! Plenty of patience, and plenty of time."