CHAPTER XXI.

THE BAR SINISTER.

It was a close night; the men were smoking their cigarettes on the terrace. Cripps was one of them; he was staying the night; he wished himself a hundred miles away. But Francis Freke took him in hand; they disappeared together, and a minute later the billiard-room windows burnt out of the night.

Mr. Sellwood was left a little in the cold. Claude and Jack were pacing the terrace with linked arms and lowered voices, and he wished to speak to Jack. Mr. Sellwood knew all. He was deeply sorry for Jack, for whom he had done his best at dinner by talking incessantly from grace to grace. The Home Secretary could be immensely entertaining when he chose; he had chosen to-night, as much for his daughter's sake as for Jack's. Olivia was his favourite child.

But then Dalrymple had not been there
to heckle and insult his superior; he was gone nobody knew where. Not that he was gone for good, the luck stopped short of that. It appeared, however, that he had been excluded by a majority of two to one from the triangular council in the Poet's Corner. Since then he had not been seen; but his bag was still in his room, and it was only another of his liberties to absent himself from dinner without a word.

Olivia was playing the piano in the drawing-room. The windows were wide open, and Mr. Sellwood listened with his white head bent in sorrowful perplexity. The execution was faulty, as usual, because Olivia was an idle musician; but there was feeling in her fingers, she had a certain "touch," and her attempts were better to listen to than some performances. To-night they went to her father's heart. The imperfect music spoke to him with the eloquence of broken words. It told him of his child's necessity for action in the stress of her anguish. It told him also of her love; and here was this poor fellow so taken up with Claude that it was
impossible to say to him what must be said as soon as possible.

Mr. Sellwood gave it up for the present, and went to look for his wife.

"There's only one more thing, old man," Jack was saying, "and then I'm done. I don't want to load you up to the eyes with messages and all that. But I should like you to take care of this little bit of a key, and give it to her as soon as ever you think fit. It belongs to that chain bracelet business I got her for her birthday. As you know, I first wanted to give her a ring, but she wouldn't have it; and when I changed it for the bracelet, which cost about half as many shillings as the ring did pounds, I couldn't look poor Hopgood in the face. It was such a sell for him. So we were going back to-morrow to get that ring for our engagement, and to look old Hopgood in the face. That was one of our plans; we made so many when we were out this morning! I never knew a morning go at such a lick. But I remember it all—I remember everything. I've started going over every word we've said, so that I shan't forget anything. There's not such a vast
lot to keep in your head. Only a day and a half of an engagement; but I've got to live on those thirty odd hours for the rest of my time."

Claude looked away; the drawing-room windows were a blurr to his eyes; and Olivia's erratic rendering of Chopin filled in the pause. It was the incoherent expression of unutterable emotion. Jack listened also, nodding time with his head. The calmness and the nobility of despair had settled on his spirit, as on that of a captain going down with his ship.

He talked on, and his tone was entirely his own. It was neither bitter, querulous, nor wilfully pathetic; but chiefly contemplative, with a reminiscence here and the discovery of some consolation there. He recalled the humours of the situation, and laughed outright but staccato, as at remembered sayings of the newly dead. Beyond the loss of Olivia he had little to regret; even that would make another man of him for ever and a day. (So he talked.) And his English summer would be something to look back on always; it was pleasure to the good, which nothing could undo or take away; the experience of a second
lifetime had been crammed into those few weeks. Let him remember that when he got back to the bush. Suppose he had never left the bush? Then he would never have seen the old country, and seen it (as he said) from the front seats; he would never have found his own soul, nor known the love of a lovely girl, nor the joy of life as he knew it now. So he was really to be congratulated to the end; there was no occasion to pity him at all.

Claude, however, was not comforted; he had never been so wretched in his life. And he showed it so plainly, and was withal so conscious of the display, that he felt quite sure that Jack's ingenious consolations were not meant entirely for Jack. He was ashamed of himself on this, as on every other score. He was to blame for the whole business, since it was he who had scoured Australia for the Red Marquis's son. Nor could he believe the other's protestations of personal solace and resignation; they had been made with wistful glances at the lighted windows, glances that Claude had seen as they both leant back against the balustrade.
"Aha!" said Jack suddenly. "Here are Mr. Sellwood and Lady Caroline coming to have it out with me. Better leave me to them, old man."

"All right," said Claude, "but we have lots more to talk about. Where can I find you, and when?"

Jack hesitated; the Sellwoods were within earshot as he whispered, "Twelve o'clock at the hut!" And Claude walked away, with his hand aching from a sudden and most crushing grip.

"My wife and I would like to speak to you," said the Home Secretary, halting in front of Jack with Lady Caroline on his arm. "My dear fellow, we are so very sorry for you: we know everything."

"Everything!" echoed Lady Caroline, with slow dramatic force.

"Thanks to Jack," put in her husband sharply; "it was he who gave instructions that we should be told at once. It was so very good of you, Jack, my boy, to think of us in your trouble. You have behaved splendidly all through; that's what makes us all feel this so keenly;
and I am quite sure that you will behave nobly now. My dear fellow, it isn't the fact of your not being the Duke of St. Osmund's that forces me to take this tone; it's the unfortunate circumstances of your birth, which have now been proved, I am afraid, beyond the possibility of that doubt which nobody would welcome more thankfully than myself. We are all very fond of you. I for one have learned to admire you too. But this most miserable discovery must alter everything except our feeling towards you. We are bound to consider our daughter."

"Our youngest child," said Lady Caroline. "Our ewe lamb!"

"Of course," replied Jack. "I see what you mean. What do you want me to do?"

"It may seem very hard," said Mr. Sellwood, "but we wish you to release Olivia from her engagement."

"To release her instantly!" cried Lady Caroline.

"I have done that already," said Jack with some disdain. "Did you really think, sir, that I should wait to be told?"
Mr. Sellwood muttered an oath as he held out his hand.

"I have made a mistake. I hope you will forgive me," he said; and his hand was crushed in its turn.

"And what did she say?" asked Lady Caroline.

"She refused to be released."

"I knew it! George, the girl is mad. And pray what do you propose to do now?"

"What do you think I ought to do?"

"Ought?" cried Lady Caroline. "I think you ought to go away and never see her again!"

"Or, rather, let us take her away," said Mr. Sellwood. "It may seem hard and abominable, but there's no doubt that from our point of view a separation is the most desirable course."

"It is hard," replied Jack; "but, as it happens, it's the very plan I hit on for myself. Not a word, sir, if you please. You're perfectly right. She could not marry me now; and I would not marry her, knowing what I am. It's out of the question altogether. But Olivia is quite on to do it—at least she thought she was before dinner. I haven't seen her since. I'm
not going to see her again. She's just the sort of angel who would swap heaven for hell to stand by the man she was fond of! But she musn't be let. I agree with you there. It was the first thing I thought of myself. I made up my mind to clear out; and, if you want to know, I'm off now."

"Now!" cried Mr. Sellwood.

Lady Caroline said nothing.

"Yes, now; there's no more to be said; and the sooner I get it over the better for all concerned."

"But, my dear fellow, where are you going, and what do you intend to do? Have you made any plans? I wouldn't do anything in a hurry if I were you; we're a family party here; and all our wits put together would surely be better than yours! We might fix up something between us."

Jack shook his head.

"You're very kind," he said; "but it's all fixed up. I'm going straight back to the bush. This is Thursday; I can't catch to-morrow's steamer, but I can do better. I can take the overland express to-morrow night, and join last
Aveek's boat at Brindisi. I'm going to sleep the night—never mind where. I don't want old Claude on my tracks; I've said good-bye to him too, though he doesn't know it either. He wants to do too much for me altogether. If you stay up with him till twelve, he'll tell you he's got to look me up at the hut; and you may tell him, sir, if you'll be so good, to sit tight, for he won't find me there. Say good-bye to him for me, and tell him he's been the best mate I've ever struck; but don't let him come up and see me off. Cripps I'm to meet in town. I'm going to let them finance me out again, since they fetched me home in the beginning; but not another red cent will I touch. Why should I? I've had a good run for my money—that is, for theirs. I'm no worse off than I was before. I should even be sure of the same old billet on Carara that used to suit me well enough, if I only could see Mr. Dalrymple before I start; but I'm bothered if I know where he's got to."

Mr. Sellwood was heavy with thought; his wife had left them; and he had heard a sob in her throat as she turned away. He had an
inkling of her treatment of this poor fellow; he did not know everything, but he knew enough to hail his wife's sob with a thankful thrill. So there was a heart in her somewhere still! He had thought otherwise for some years; in another moment he doubted it once more. Lady Caroline appeared at the drawing-room window, shut it, and drew down the blind. And yet—and yet her husband had himself been wishing for somebody to do that very thing!

Olivia was still at the piano, and her performance had sounded a little too near at hand until now. It was near enough still; but the shutting of the window deadened the sound. Chopin had merged into Mendelssohn. Olivia happened to be note-perfect in one or two of the Lieder. Her father had never heard her play them so well. But Jack had no music in his soul—could not whistle two bars in tune—and though, even while speaking, he listened visibly, it was not to the music as music, but to the last sound of Olivia he was ever to hear. Her footstep in the distance would have done as well.
"I wouldn't go to-night, old fellow," the Home Secretary said at length. "I see no point in it. To-morrow would be time enough."

"Ah, you must think I find it easy work!" exclaimed Jack, a little bitterly for once. "It's not so easy as all that: it's got to be done at once, when you're screwed up to it, or it may never come off at all. Don't you try to keep me; don't let anybody else try either! Let me go while I'm on to go—alone. I might take it different to-morrow!"

He spoke hoarsely; the voice was as significant as the words. Mr. Sellwood was impressed by both; he followed the other to the nearest flight of steps leading down to the lawn.

"Let me come with you," he urged. "Surely there is something one can do! And I've never seen the hut; I should like to."

"Wait till I've gone," was the reply. "I want you to stand in my tracks and block anybody from following me. Head them another way! Only give me quarter of an hour to clear out of the hut, and another quarter's start, and I'm—and I'm——"

He lost himself in a sudden absence of
mind. The music had stopped, and the night seemed insolently still. Jack was half-way down the steps; the Home Secretary leaned over the balustrade above. Jack reached up his hand.

"Good-bye," he said.

Mr. Sellwood, hesitating, kept his hand. The window that had been shut was thrown up again.

"Papa, is that you?"

"Yes, my dear."

Mr. Sellwood had turned round.

"And where is Jack?"

"Not here," whispered Jack.

"Not here," repeated Mr. Sellwood; and, looking behind him, he found that he had spoken the truth.

"Then I'm coming down to you, and you must help me—"

Jack lost the rest as he ran. He thought he heard his own name again, but he was not sure. He stopped under the nearest tree. Mercifully there was no moon. Olivia could not have seen him, for he himself could see no more of the Towers than the lighted windows and their reflections upon the terrace. On that dim stage
the silhouette of Mr. Sellwood was still dis­
cernible: another joined it: the two figures
became one: and in the utter stillness not only
the girl's sobs but her father's broken words
were audible under the tree.

Jack fled.

He ran hard to the hut, and lighted it up as
it had never been lighted before. He cut up a
candle in half-inch sections, and stuck them all
over with their own grease. Thoroughness was
an object as well as despatch; nothing must be
missed; but his first act was to change his
clothes. He put on the ready-made suit and
the wideawake in which he had landed; he had
kept them in the hut. Then he pulled from
under the bunk the cage his cats had travelled
in, and he bundled the cats into it once more.
Lastly he rolled up his swag, less neatly,
perhaps, than of old, but with the blue blanket
outermost as before, and the little straps reefed
round it and buckled tight. He would want
these things in the bush; besides, the whim was
upon him to go exactly as he had come. Only
one item of his original impedimenta he de­
cided to leave behind: the old bush saddle
would be a needless incumbrance; but with his swag, and his cats, and his wideawake, he set forth duly, after blowing out all the candle ends.

The night seemed darker than ever; neither moon nor star was to be seen, and Jack had to stop and consider when he got outside. He desired to strike a straight line to the gates; he knew how they lay from the hut, though he had never been over the ground before. To a bushman, however, even without a star to help him, such a task could present no difficulties. He computed the distance at something less than a mile; but in Australia he had gone as the crow flies through league upon league of untrodden scrub. Out there he had enjoyed the reputation of being "a good bushman," and he meant to enjoy it again.

But his head was hot with other thoughts, and he was out of practice. Instead of hitting the wall, and following it up to the gates, as he intended, he erred the other way, and came out upon the drive at no great distance from the house. This was a false start, indeed, and a humiliation also; but his thoughts had strayed
back to Olivia, and it was as if his feet had followed their lead. He would think of her no more to-night.

The drive was undesirable, for obvious reasons; still it was the safest policy to keep to it now, and the chances were that he would meet nobody. Yet he did; a footstep first, and then the striking of a match, came to his ears as he was nearing the gates. He crept under the trees. The match was struck again, and yet again, before it lit. Then Jack came out of hiding, and strode forward without further qualms, for the flame was lighting the cigar and illuminating the face of his friend Dalrymple.

"Hallo, sir!" began Jack, "I'd given you up."

"Why, Jack, is that you? I can't see an inch front of my cigar," said the squatter, as the match burnt itself out on the gravel where it had been thrown.

"Yes, it's me; where have you been?"

"Where are you going?"

"Mine first," said Jack.

"All right. I've been talking to Master Hunt. Now where are you going?"
"Back to Australia!"

Jack waited for an exclamation; for some seconds there was none; then the squatter laughed softly to himself.

"I thought as much!" said he. "I knew exactly what the lawyer came to say, for I saw it in his face. Now tell me, and we'll see if I'm right."

And it appeared that he was, by the way in which he kept nodding his head as Jack told him all. Meanwhile they had retired under the trees, and by the red end of his cigar the squatter had seen Jack's wideawake; using his cigar as a lantern he had examined the cage of cats; whereon his face would have proved a sufficiently severe commentary had there been any other light for Jack to see it by.

"Now," said Dalrymple, "stand tight. I've got something to tell you, my boy!" And he told it in the fewest whispered words.

Jack was speechless.

"Nonsense! I don't believe it," he cried when he found his tongue.

"But I'm in a position to prove it," replied the squatter. "I'll give you a par-
ticular or two as we walk back to the house. What! you hesitate? Come, come; surely my word is good enough for that! Do be sensible; leave your infernal cats where they are, and come you along with me!"