CHAPTER XXII.
DE MORTUIS.

The Home Secretary had never spent a more uncomfortable hour. His favourite daughter had stanched her tears, and gone straight to the root of the very delicate matter at issue between them. Much as her tears had depressed him, however, Mr. Sellwood preferred them to the subsequent attitude. It was too independent for his old-fashioned notions, and yet it made him think all the more of Olivia. Indeed she was her father's child in argument—spirited and keen and fair. His point of view she took for granted, and proceeded to expound her own. Much that she said was unanswerable; a little made him fidget—for between the sexes there is no such shyness as that which a father finds in his heart towards his grown-up girls. But a certain bluntness of speech was not the least refreshing trait in Olivia's downright character; and decidedly this was not a
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matter to be glossed over with synonyms for a spade. She wanted to know how the circumstances of the birth affected the value of the man—and so forth. Mr. Sellwood replied as a man of the world, and detested his replies. But the worst was his guilty knowledge of Jack’s flight. This made him detest himself; it made him lie; and it filled him with a relief greater than his surprise when voices came out of the darkness of the drive, and one of them was Jack’s.

Olivia ran forward.

“At last! Oh, Jack, where have you been?”

Mr. Sellwood never heard the answer; he was bristling at the touch of Dalrymple, who had led him aside.

“Entirely my doing,” explained the squatter; “but I can justify it. I mean to do so at once. Am I right in understanding the bar sinister to be your only objection to our friend?”

“You may put it so,” said Mr. Sellwood shortly.

“Then I shall have the pleasure of removing the objection: the bar doesn’t exist.”
"Your grounds for thinking so, Mr. Dalrymple?"

"I don't think. I know. And I'm here to prove what I know. Good heavens, do you suppose he was no more to me than one of my ordinary station hands? He was the son—at all events, the stepson—of one of my oldest friends."

"The stepson! May I ask the name of your friend?"

"It is unnecessary. You have guessed it. I have a good deal to explain. Where can we go? I should like Lafont and Cripps to hear what I've got to say. Cripps especially—he will be able to check half my facts."

"I think we ought all to hear them," remarked Sellwood; "we are all interested and concerned."

"You mean the ladies? I would rather not; you can tell them afterwards; and as to the young lady, you may make your mind easy about her. If that was the only obstacle, I undertake to remove it. You can afford to trust her out of your sight."

"I shall mind my own business," snapped
the Home Secretary; nevertheless, he led the way indoors with no more than a glance towards Olivia and her lover, who were still within hail; and five minutes later, as many gentlemen were empanelled in the billiard-room. Claude and Cripps and Mr. Sellwood occupied the couches at one end; Francis Freke palpitated in a corner; and Dalrymple leant against the table, his legs crossed, his arms folded, a quiet smile upon his face. He was waiting for a clock over the chimney-piece to finish striking; the hour was eleven.

"Well, gentlemen," he began, "I shall not detain you many minutes. I have certain statements to make, and any proofs that you may want I shall be happy to supply to-morrow or any time you like. Those statements will ignore, as far as possible, my own relations with the notorious Lord Maske. These I shall explain later, and you will then understand why I have hitherto held my peace concerning them. I have known all along that our friend outside—shall we call him John Dillamore?—was not and never could be the Duke of St. Osmund's; and though Mr. Cripps
may look as black as his boots, he never consulted my opinion when he took John Dillamore away from my station, and it was no business of mine to interfere. Mr. Cripps seemed sufficiently positive about the matter; and, knowing what I know, I really don't blame Mr. Cripps. But this by the way. I shall first confine myself to those incidents in the Marquis's career of which, occurring as they did at the antipodes, and as long ago as the 'fifties, very little has hitherto been known here in England; and I repeat that I shall afterwards be prepared to prove every word I am about to say.

"The Marquis of Maske landed in Melbourne in the early part of 1854. There for a time he cut a great dash, spent an enormous quantity of money, and indeed reached the end of his resources by the middle of the year. He then tried his luck on the Ballarat gold-fields, but his luck was out. At the diggings he sailed under an alias, and under an alias he drifted to Tasmania as early as July, 1854. And at Hobart Town, as it was then called, he met the lady for whose sake he broke, though
unwittingly, one of the criminal laws of his native land.

"Now, I happen to know a good deal about that lady; but the more impersonally one enters into details of this kind the more chance has one of making such details perfectly clear to you. As it is you will find some little complications here and there. But I shall do my best to present them as intelligibly as possible; and where I fail, you will perhaps make a note of the point, and call my attention to it presently. The lady's name was Greenfield. Mrs. Greenfield was a young widow with one male child; but not, as you might suppose, a young widow with money. And the Marquis married her at Hobart under peculiar, and really rather extenuating, circumstances.

"Of course, he had a wife all the time. You know all about that. It has leaked out through another channel—a channel I happen to have spent the last few hours in exploring. I have only just returned from the Lower Farm. I find the first wife died in 1860. But you may take my word for one thing: her husband had reason to believe she was..."
already dead when he married for the second time in 1854.

"As a matter of fact, Eliza Hunt, as she was called, was actually at death's door in June of the latter year. On a day of which she was not expected to see the close, the late Duke wrote to his son (I happen to possess the letter, Mr. Cripps), telling him, with perhaps a pardonable satisfaction, that the end was only a question of hours; and making certain overtures which I fear only excited Lord Maske's contempt and disdain. The Marquis did not profess to be a pious man; his father did. They had parted in anger, and in anger Maske tore up his father's letter; but I collected the fragments, and preserved them—and I shall justify that before I'm done. Maske tore the letter to little bits. But that very week he married again on the strength of it. And I needn't tell you there was trouble when the next mail came in! The woman was still alive; though still hopelessly—or rather hopefully—ill.

"So the couple in Tasmania lay low until their child was born—an event which proved fatal to the mother, and brought the Marquis up
with a round turn, as the saying is. He was, as you may have heard, a very heartless man; but I happen to know that he was reasonably fond of his second wife, and reasonably grieved at her death. As a matter of fact, it drove him almost crazy at the time, and embittered him for the rest of his days. The point is, however, that he was thus left with two boys—a new-born weakling and an absolutely hardy child of two, the issue of its mother's first—and only legal—marriage. The weakling he registered as he would have done had the marriage been really valid; and, mark you, for all he knew it might be valid still. After that second letter, saying that the English wife was still hopelessly ill, he never heard again, either as to her recovery or her death, until the latter occurred some few years later. But it might have occurred while the second letter was still on the sea, for it was only a month behind the first, and they took two or three months coming in those days. And this is a point worth noting,” said Dalrymple, uncrossing his arms, and for the first time making a gesture.

“'It is a nice point,” conceded Mr. Sellwood.
"In a nasty story!" cried the squatter, with his sardonic laugh. "No, not quite that; it's too strong a word. Still I am not here to whitewash the Marquis of Maske; indeed, the next feature of the case is wholly indefensible. You must know that all this time the exile nourished the most venomous feelings towards his family in general and the old Duke in particular. Unlovely as they were, however, I still think there was some excuse for such sentiments; the boy had been harshly treated; he was literally forced to desert his first wife; had they lived together, in England or elsewhere, not a penny-piece would have been theirs until the death of the Duke. Hence the silence of the Hunts—for the consideration you wot of. It wasn't the sort of arrangement that would have gone on very long had the woman lived, or left a child; but she died childless, as you know; and the Hunts' subsequent policy was obvious even to the Hunts. Nor was it an arrangement calculated to increase a young man's respect for his father; in the case of Maske it intensified contempt, and created the craving for revenge. I have heard him speak so
often of that revenge! He would spring an Australian heir upon the family; that was his first, and, as you know, his very last idea. He even spoke of it, as I understand, in the letter that was pinned to the tree under which he was found dead in the bush! You see it was his dominant idea in life. But the heir he spoke of was not his son at all. And that's the indefensible feature of which I spoke."

"If not his son, who was he, pray?" asked Cripps, with indignant incredulity; for his own repute was in question here.

The squatter smiled. "Can you ask? The elder of the two boys; the son of Mrs. Greenfield by her first marriage," he quietly replied.

"And what of his own son?"

"Dead."

"You will find that difficult to prove!" cried the lawyer hotly.

"Yes? I think not; he died in Sydney, where the father migrated after the mother's death; he was dead within six months of his birth. You saw the certificate of the birth in Hobart, I believe?"

"Certainly I did."
Then here is that of the death; better keep it; you will have more use for it than I."

And the squatter turned round, and rolled the red ball up and down the board, with his quiet sinister smile, while the men on the lounges examined the document he had put in the solicitor's hands.

"It looks all right," said Cripps at length, in a tone that made Dalrymple laugh heartily as he faced about.

"It looks all right, eh? That's all right! Mr. Cripps, your discernment—but excuse me! We are not here to bark and bite; we are here to clear up a mystery, at least I am. Is there any other point, gentlemen, which I can elucidate before we go any further?"

"I think there is one," said Claude, speaking nervously. "I have seen the last letter my uncle wrote, in which he mentioned an heir. I presume, in order to carry out the revenge you speak of, he called the living child by the dead child's name——"

"Exactly. He did it deliberately. I was coming to that."

"But he seemed uncertain as to the living
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child's whereabouts. My point is this: where
was the so-called heir at the time that last
letter was written?

"Lost," said Dalrymple, shutting his ugly
lips as you shut a window. "Lost in the bush,
like Maske himself, only the child's body was
not found. The father had tattooed one of
the eagles of his crest upon the little chap's
chest—I am afraid, to further his deception. I
was in all his secrets, as you see; indeed, you
may call me his accomplice without offending
me; and I'm bound to say I considered the
tattooing a smart idea. However, a judgment
was at hand. The child was lost for many
years. And the rest is easily told; it refers to
me."

The squatter looked at Mr. Sellwood—not
for the first time. As on the other occasions,
however, he ran his eyes against an absolutely
impassive, pink countenance.

"Mr. Sellwood may remember my little
anecdote of the iron store, the Queensland
blacks, and the French eagle on the chest of
the stray shearer who saved all our lives?"

Mr. Sellwood very slightly inclined his head.
"Well, that was the finding of the soi-disant Jack Dillamore. I knew all about him. For his father's sake, I never lost sight of him again; for his father's sake (and also because the idea appealed to me personally) I allowed my old chum's very reprehensible plan to come off, and our friend Mr. Cripps to lay hold of my Happy Jack for the live Duke of St. Osmund's: and for the sake of some fun for my pains, I came home myself to see how matters were progressing. I'm bound to say I was disappointed. Happy Jack had grown tamer than I could have believed possible in the time. And hang me if the fellow wasn't in love! My disgust was such that I was on the point of taking myself off this very afternoon, and leaving the supposititious Duke (whom it wasn't my business to depose) to marry and save the Upper House by the example of high morality he seemed certain to set; but at the last moment I discovered his trouble. He was found out without my assistance; he was cutting a worse figure than was in any way necessary; and was about to lose, not only the title and emoluments he had
enjoyed for some months, but the charming girl whom he had fairly won in love. That seemed a trifle too hard! I determined to speak out. I have done so: and I am prepared to prove every word I have said. The certificate now in your pocket, Mr. Cripps, was not the only one I had in mine. At the moment, however, there’s no more to be said—except a few words with reference to Jack Greenfield’s future. He has suffered enough. I have been, if not at the bottom of it, at all events to blame in the matter. I have a little inadequate scheme of reparation, which I shall submit to you, gentlemen, in order that you may use your influence with Jack, if necessary. The point is that I am never going back to Australia any more. I was born and brought up in the old country, and I’ve got the taste for it again during the few days I’ve been home. Indeed, I had never lost the taste; but I don’t intend to run the risk any more. I am lucky enough to own one of the crack sheep-stations of New South Wales. I shall want a permanent manager in my absence. I needn’t tell you who is the very man for
that billet. Jack Greenfield—if he'll take it."

"A good house?" said Mr. Sellwood casually.

"The best homestead in the Riverina. Trust me for that."

Mr. Sellwood said no more. His mind was made up: better lose his daughter than have her break her heart. He could not forget the earlier experiences of the evening. The surprises of this hour were enchanting compared with the embarrassments of the last. Then he had no reason to doubt Dalrymple's word as to Jack's actual antecedents; where he doubted it, was in another matter altogether. At this point in his reflections, however, and with the inevitable discussion of the immaterial points still raging around him, Mr. Sellwood was brought to his feet by the violent opening of the billiard-room door and an agitated apparition of his wife upon the threshold. Something was the matter: had the lovers eloped? No; with Mary Freke they were at the heels of Lady Caroline, who came the length of the room at something ludicrously like a run—her very fringe awry,
and a horrified glance shooting from the corner of each eye at the nonchalant, well-preserved figure of Dalrymple the squatter.

"Do you know what they are saying downstairs?" cried her Ladyship, looking as far as was possible at everybody at once. "Matthew Hunt is here, and do you know what he is saying? That neither Jack nor Claude is the Duke of St. Osmund's, but you—you—you!" And she turned like a podgy tigress upon none other than the squatter himself.

"I could have told him that," remarked Mr. Sellwood, calmly; he had arrived at the conclusion exactly ten seconds before.

"I shall tell him something he doesn't bargain for—the born idiot!" added the squatter sotto voce.

"Then you believe it?" cried Lady Caroline to her husband. "You must be mad!"

"Your Ladyship is so right; it would indeed be madness to dream of entertaining so preposterous a notion!" cried Mr. Cripps, who was literally dancing with disbelief. "Even Mr. Dalrymple will hardly go as far as that. He has gone farther already than the law will
follow him; we'll do him the justice to hold him irresponsible for this absurd report! He knows as well as we do that the Marquis of Maske was found dead in the bush; of that we have absolute proof. Even if we hadn't, who has recognised him? Has he one single witness to his identity? If so, let him be called!"

"The gentleman is excited," remarked Dalrymple, ringing the bell. "Does it really not occur to him that I might have found myself dead in the bush, and authenticated my own death by very obvious methods? Is it inconceivable that a young man with my then reputation should jump at the chance of dying on paper—if you will permit the expression? Such a death offers unusual advantages, a second birth among others. However, I never meant to be born again, least of all in this rather melodramatic manner; but I couldn't resist coming home to see the fun, and it serves me right to have to stop and pay the score. Witnesses? I had certainly no intention of calling any to-night; but now that my hand has been forced it can't be helped. The elder
Hunt is one; knew me at sight; and here comes Stebbings for another. Shut the door behind you, Stebbings, and answer a couple of questions. It's generally supposed that you were drunk yesterday when I arrived. Were you, or were you not?

"I was not, your Grace."

"'Your Grace,' you see!" repeated the squatter. "I'm afraid that was premature, Stebbings! However, if you were not drunk, and you certainly conveyed that impression, what was the matter with you?"

"Nervousness!" cried Stebbings, who was sufficiently nervous now. "I had seen the dead! I had recognised your Grace!"

"Exactly; and I swore at you as a blind, to explain the complete state of collapse that you were in. That's all, Stebbings; you may go. Jack, I see your face! You wonder you didn't spot it at the time? Stebbings backed me up, or else you would have done; for my part, I confess I was more frightened when you found us talking together in my room, when I was packing. I assure you all, I meant to clear out then; believe it or not, it's the case. In spite
of what I said just now, I'm not so wedded to an English life as I fancied Jack was; and I had no idea at the time that his position was at all insecure. Yes, my boy, you were welcome to the whole thing! I was going back to the bush—"

"You were going back!" cried Jack coming forward; and Olivia came also, flushed with a joy that rendered her uniquely indifferent to the great disclosure. Jack was hers. What did it matter who was the Duke?

"To be sure I was," said the squatter; "but now I think it will have to be you after all. What do you say to managing Carara? What do you say, Miss Sellwood, to helping him to try? You must talk to your father about it. And for Heaven's sake, Jack, don't thank me; I've been the worst friend you ever had in your life."

Mr. Sellwood was already speaking to his wife. Jack and their daughter stood hand-in-hand beside them. The new Duke turned his back and joined Claude on his lounge. The solicitor had beaten a retreat; the Frekes had done so before him; and the rest of their party,
including Jack, did so now. But Jack returned before either Claude or the squatter had left the room.

"The worst friend I ever had!" said he reproachfully, as he took his old master's hand. "What should I be doing to-night if it hadn't been for you? You may say what you like; you've helped to make me the happiest man in all the world. I can marry her after all! Mr. Sellwood's as white a man as I know; even Lady Caroline has just given us best! But you"—and he laid an affectionate rough hand on Claude's shoulder—"dear old boy, what can I say to you? I'm ashamed to look you in the face. You've lost everything!"

Claude was very pale; the other's honest eyes were shining with sympathy beneath their bushy brows; but the new Duke laughed aloud.

"Lost everything?" he cried. "Not a bit of it! I'm not going to live for ever, and Claude's exactly where he was—the next man in. You think not? And have you known me all these years, and do you really and truly expect me to marry again? Jack—my boy—have I to tell
you how it is with me? I have been a bad old lot in my time; but one woman I once loved well enough to spoil me for ever for all the rest."

He paused an instant, and it was quite a tender hand he laid on Jack's shoulder.

"And there's one man I love for her sake!"