CHAPTER III.

A CHANCE LOST.

It was the pink of the evening when the cousins drove off in a four-wheeler with the cats on top. Claude had been in many minds about their destination, until the Duke had asked him to recommend an hotel. At that he had hesitated a little, and finally pitched upon the First Avenue. A variety of feelings guided his choice, chief among them being a vague impression that his wild kinsman would provoke less attention in Holborn than in Northumberland Avenue. To Holborn, at all events, they were now on their way.

Claude sat far back in the cab; he felt thankful it was not a hansom. In the Mall they met a string of them, taking cloaked women and white-breasted men out to dinner. Claude saw one or two faces he knew, but was himself unseen. He saw them stare and smile at the tanned and bearded visage beneath that villainous wideawake, which was thrust from
one window to the other with the eager and unrestrained excitement of a child. He felt ashamed of poor Jack. He was sincerely ashamed of this very feeling.

"What streets!" whispered the Duke in an awestruck whisper. "We've nothing like 'em in Melbourne. They'd knock spots off Sydney. I've been in both."

Claude had a sudden thought. "For you," he said, "these streets should have a special interest."

"How's that?"

"Well, many of them belong to you."

"WHAT?"

"You are the ground landlord of some of the streets and squares we have already passed."

The brown beard had fallen in dismay; now, however, a mouthful of good teeth showed themselves in a frankly incredulous grin.

"What are you givin' us?" laughed Jack. "I see, you think you've got a loan of a new chum! Well, so you have. Go ahead!"

"Not if you don't choose to believe me," replied Claude stiffly. "I meant what I said;
1 usually do. The property has been in our family for hundreds of years."

"And now it's mine?"

"And now it's yours."

The Duke of St. Osmund's took off his monstrous wideawake, and passed the back of his hairy hand across his forehead. The gesture was eloquent of a mind appalled.

"Have I no homestead on my own run?" he inquired at length.

"You have several," said Claude, smiling; but he also hesitated.

"Several in London?" cried the Duke, aghast again.

"No—only one in town."

"That's better! I say, though, why aren't we going there?"

"Well, the fact is, they're not quite ready for you; I mean the servants. They—we were all rather rushed, you know, and they don't expect you to-night. Do you mind?"

Claude had stated but one fact of many. That morning, when he stopped his hansom at the house, he had told the servants not to expect his Grace until he telegraphed. After
seeing the Duke, he had resolved not to telegraph at all; and certainly not to instal him in his own house, as he was, without consulting other members of the family. He still considered that decision justified. Nevertheless, the Duke's reply came as a great relief.

"No, I'm just as glad," said Jack, contentedly. His contentment was only comparative, however. The first dim conception of his greatness had strangely dashed him; he was no longer the man that he had been in the train.

An athlete in a frayed frock-coat, and no shirt, was sprinting behind the cab with the customary intent; it was a glimpse of him, as they turned a corner, that slew the oppressed Duke, and brought Happy Jack back to life.

"Stop the cab!" he roared; "there's a man on the track of my cats!"

"Nonsense, my dear fellow; it's only a person who'll want sixpence for not helping with the luggage."

"Are you sure?" asked Jack suspiciously.

"How do you know he isn't a professional
cat-stealer? I must ask the cabman if they are all right!" He did so, and was re-assured.

"We're almost at the hotel now," said Claude, with misgivings; he was bitterly anticipating the sensation to be caused there by the arrival of such a Duke of St. Osmund's, and wondering whether it would be of any use suggesting a further period of incognito.

"Nearly there, are we? Then see here," said Jack, "I've got something to insist on. I mean to have my way about one matter."

Claude groaned inwardly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'll tell you straight. I'm not going to do the Dook in this hotel. I'm plain Jack Dillamore, or I don't go in."

The delight of this deliverance nearly overcame the poet.

"I think you're wise," was all he trusted himself to say. "I should be inclined to take the same course were I in your place. You will escape a great deal of the sort of adulation which turneth the soul sick. And for one night, at all events, you will be able, as an alien out-
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sider, to form an unprejudiced opinion of our unlovely metropolis."

In the bright light of his ineffable relief, Claude's little mannerisms stood out once more, like shadows when the sun shines fitfully; but it was a transient gleam. The arrival at the hotel was still embarrassing enough. The wideawake attracted attention. The attention was neither of a flattering character in itself nor otherwise desirable from any point of view. It made Claude miserable. There was also trouble about the cats.

Jack insisted on having them with him in his room. The management demurred. Jack threatened to go elsewhere. The management raised no objection; but Claude did. He handed them his card, and this settled the matter. There is but one race of Lafonts in England. So Jack had his way. A room was taken; the cats were put into it; milk was set before them; and Jack left the hotel in Claude's company, with the key of that room in his pocket.

Claude would have taken him to his club, but for both their sakes he did not dare. Yet
he was as anxious as ever to show every hospitality to the Duke. Accordingly he had refused Jack’s invitation to dine with him in the hotel, and was taking him across to the Holborn instead.

The dinner went wonderfully. Jack was delighted with the music, with the electric lights, with the marble pillars, with the gilded balconies, with the dinner itself, in fact with everything. There was but one item which did not appeal to him: he stoutly refused to drink a drop of wine.

“A promise is a promise,” said he. “I gave you my colonial in the train, and I mean to keep it; for a bit, at all events.”

Claude protested and tempted him in vain. Jack called for a lemon-squash, and turned his wine-glasses upside down. He revenged himself, however, upon the viands.

“Which entrée, please, sir?” said the waiter.

“Both!” cried Jack. “You may go on, mister, till I tell you to stop!”

After dinner the cousins went aloft, and Claude took out his cigarette case and ordered cigars for the Duke. He could not smoke them
himself, but neither, it appeared, could Jack. He produced a cutty-pipe, black and foul with age, and a cake of tobacco like a piece of shoe-leather, which he began paring with his knife. Claude had soon to sit farther away from him.

Jack did not fancy a theatre; he was strongly in favour of a quiet evening and a long talk; and it was he who proposed that they should return, for this purpose, to the First Avenue. No sooner were they comfortably settled in the hotel smoking-room, however, than the Duke announced that he must run upstairs and see to his cats. And he came down no more that night.

Claude waited patiently for twenty minutes. Then he began a note to Lady Caroline Sellwood. Then he remembered that he could, if he liked, see Lady Caroline that night. It was merely a question of driving over to his rooms in St. James's and putting himself into evening dress. On the whole, this seemed worth doing. Claude therefore followed Jack upstairs after an interval of half an hour.

The Duke's rooms were on the first floor.
Claude surprised a group of first-floor servants laughing and whispering in the corridor. The little that he heard as he passed made him hot all over. The exact words were:

"Never see such a man in my life." "Nor me, my dear!" "And yet they call this 'ere a decent 'otel!"

Claude had no doubt in his own mind as to whom they were talking about. Already the Duke inspired him with a sort of second-self-consciousness. Prepared for anything, he hastened to the room and nervously knocked at the door.

"Come in!" cried Jack's voice.

The door was unlocked; as Claude opened it the heat of the room fairly staggered him. It was a sufficiently warm summer night, yet an enormous fire was burning in the grate.

"My dear fellow!" panted Claude.

Jack was in his trousers and shirt; the sleeves were rolled up over his brawny arms; the open front revealed an estuary of hairy chest; and it was plain at a glance that the Duke was perspiring at every pore.

"It's all right," he said. "It's for the cats."
"The cats!" said Claude. They were lying round about the fire.

"Yes, poor devils! They had a fire every day in the hut, summer and winter. They never had a single one at sea. They like to sleep by it—they always did—all but Livingstone. He sleeps with me when he isn't on the loose."

"But you'll never be able to sleep in an atmosphere like this!"

Jack was cutting up a pipeful of his black tobacco,

"Well, it is warm," he admitted. "And now you mention it, I may find it a job to get asleep; but the cats like it, anyhow!" And he swore at them affectionately as he lit his pipe.

"Did you forget you'd left me downstairs?" asked Claude.

"Clean! I apologise. I took this idea into my head, and I could think of nothing else."

"May we have another window open? Thank you. I'll smoke one cigarette; then I must be off."

"Where to?"

"My chambers—to dress."
"To undress you mean!"

"No, to dress. I've got to go out to a—to a party. I had almost forgotten about it. The truth is, I want to see Lady Caroline Sellwood, who, although not a near relation, is about the only woman in London with our blood in her veins. She will want to see you. What's the matter?"

Jack's pipe had gone out in his hand; and there he stood, a pillar of perspiring bewilderment.

"A party!" he murmured. "At this time o' night!"

Claude laughed.

"It's not ten o'clock yet; if I'm there before half-past eleven I shall be too early."

"I give you best," said Jack, shaking his head, and putting another light to his pipe. "It licks me! Who's the madman who gives parties in the middle of the night?"

"My dear fellow, everybody does! In this case it's a woman: the Countess of Darlingford."

"A live Countess!"

"Well, but you're a live Duke."

"But—I'm—a live—Dook!"
Jack repeated the words as though the fact had momentarily escaped him. His pipe went out again. This time he made no attempt to relight it, but stood staring at Claude with his bare brown arms akimbo, and much trouble in his rugged, honest face.

"You can't get out of it," laughed Claude.

"I can!" he cried. "I mean to get out of it! I'm not the man for the billet. I wasn't dragged up to it. And I don't want it! I shall only make a darned ass of myself and everybody else mixed up with me. I may be the man by birth, but I'm not the man by anything else; and look here! I want to back out of it while there's time; and you're the very man to help me. I wasn't dragged up to it—but you were. I'm not the man for the billet—but you are. The very man! You go to parties in the middle of the night, and you think nothing of 'em. They'd be the death of Happy Jack! The whole thing turns me sick with funk—the life, the money, the responsibility. I never got a sight of it till to-day; and now I don't want it at any price. You'd have got it if it hadn't been for me; so take it now—for God's sake take
it now! If it's mine, it's mine to give. I give it to you. Claude, old toucher, be the Dook yourself. Let me and the cats clear back to the bush!"

The poet had listened, with amazement, with amusement, with compassion and concern. He now shook his head.

"You ask an impossibility. Without going into the thing, take my word for it that what you propose is utterly and hopelessly out of the question."

"Couldn't I disappear?" said Jack eagerly. "Couldn't I do a bolt in the night? It's a big chance for you; surely you won't lose it by refusing to help me clear out?"

Claude again shook his head.

"In a week's time you will be laughing at what you are saying now. You are one of the richest men in England; everything that money can buy you can have. You own some of the loveliest seats in the whole country; wait till I have shown you Maske Towers! You won't want to clear out then. You won't ask me to be the Duke again!"

He had purposely dwelt upon those material allurements which the bushman's mind would
most readily grasp. And it was obvious that his arguments had hit the target, although not, perhaps, the bull’s-eye.

"Anyhow," said Jack, doggedly, “it’s an offer! And I repeat it. What’s more, I mean it too!"

"Then I decline it," returned Claude, to humour him; “and there’s an end of the matter. Look here, though. One thing I promise. If you like I’ll see you through!"

"You will?"

"I will with all my heart."

"And you’re quite sure you won’t take on the whole show yourself?"

"Quite sure," said Claude, smiling.

"Still, you’ll tell me what to do? You’ll tell me what not to do? You’ll show me the ropes? You’ll have hold of my sleeve?"

"I’ll do all that; at least, I’ll do all I can. It may not be much. Still I’ll do it."

Jack held out a hot, damp hand; yet, just then, he seemed to be perspiring most freely under the eyes.

"You’re a good sort, Claudy!" said he hoarsely.

"Good-night, old fellow," said Claude Lafont.