CHAPTER IV.

NOT IN THE PROGRAMME

Lady Caroline Sellwood's incomparable Wednesdays were so salient a feature of those seasons during which her husband was in office, and her town house in St. James's Square, that their standard is still quoted as the ideal of its kind. These afternoons were never dull. Lady Caroline cast a broad net, and her average draught included representatives of every decent section of the community. But she also possessed some secret recipe, the envy and the despair of other professional hostesses, and in her rooms there was never an undue preponderance of any one social ingredient. Every class—above a certain line, not drawn too high—was represented; none was overdone; nor was the mistake made of "packing" the assembly with interesting people. The very necessary complement of the merely interested was never wanting. One met beauty as well as brains; wealth as well as wit; and quite as many colourless nonentities as
notorieties of every hue. The proportion was always perfect, and yet not more so than the general good-temper of the guests. They for-gathered like long-lost brothers and sisters: the demagogue and the divine; the judge and the junior; the oldest lady and the newest woman; the amateur playwright and the actor-manager who had lost his play; the minor novelist and the young lady who had never heard of him; and my Lords and Ladies (whose carriages half-filled the Square) with the very least of these. It was wonderful to see them together; it was a solemn thought, but yet a fact, that their heavenly behaviour was due simply and entirely to the administrative genius of Lady Caroline Sellwood.

The Home Secretary hated the Wednesdays; he was the one person who did; and he only hated them because they were Wednesdays—and from the period of his elderly infatuation for golf. It was his great day for a round; and Lady Caroline had to make his excuses every week when it was fine. This was another thing which her Ladyship did beautifully. She would say, with a voice full of sympathy equally
divided between those mutual losers, her guest and her husband, that poor dear George had to address such and such a tiresome deputation; when, as a matter of fact, he was "addressing" his golf-ball on Wimbledon Common, and enjoying himself exceedingly. Now, among other Wednesdays, the Home Secretary was down at Wimbledon (with a prominent member of the Opposition) on the afternoon following the arrival in London of the ninth Duke of St Osmund's; and Mr Sellwood never knew whether to pity his wife, or to congratulate himself, on his absence from her side on that occasion.

One of their constant ornaments, Claude Lafont, had been forced to eschew these Wednesdays of late weeks. Lady Caroline Sellwood had never been quite the same to him since the Easter recess. She had treated him from that time with a studied coolness quite inexplicable to his simple mind; and finally, at Lady Darlingford's, she had been positively rude. Claude, of course, had gone there expressly to prepare Lady Caroline for the new Duke. This he conceived to be his immediate duty, and he
attempted to perform it, in the kindliest spirit imaginable, with all the tact at his command. Lady Caroline declined to hear him out. She chose to put a sinister construction upon his well-meant words, and to interrupt them with the announcement that she intended, with Claude's permission, to judge the Duke for herself. Was he married? Ha! then where was he to be found? Claude told her, was coldly thanked, and went home to writhe all that Tuesday night under the mortification of his kinswoman's snub.

Yet, on the Wednesday afternoon, Claude Lafont not only went to the Sellwoods' as though nothing had happened, but he was there before the time. And Lady Caroline was not only amazed, but (for the first time since Easter) really pleased to see him: for already she had been given cause to regret her insolent disregard of him overnight at Lady Darlingford's. She was even composing an apology when the whiteness of Claude's face brought her thoughts to a standstill.

"Have you seen him?" he cried as they met.
"The Duke?"
"Yes—haven't you seen him this morning?"
"No, indeed! Haven't you?"

Claude sat down with a groan, shaking his head, and never seeing the glittering, plump, outstretched hand.

"Haven't you?" repeated Lady Caroline, sitting down herself.

"Not this morning. I made sure he would come here!"

"So he ought to have been. I asked him to lunch. The note was written and posted the instant we came in from the Darlingfords'. Claude, I wasn't nice to you there! Can you forgive me? I thought you were prejudiced. My dreadful temper rose in arms on the side of the absent man; it always was my great weakness rightly or wrongly to take the part of those who aren't there to stick up for themselves!"

Her great weakness was of quite another character, but Claude bowed. He was barely listening.

"I've lost him," he said, looking at Lady Caroline with a rolling eye. "He's disappeared. "Never!"
“This morning,” said Claude. “I did so hope he was here!”

“He sent no answer, not one word, and he never came. Who saw him last?”

“The hotel people, early this morning. It seems he ordered a horse for seven o'clock, shortly after I left him last night. So they got him one, and off he went before breakfast in the flannel collar and the outrageous bush wide-awake in which he landed. And he’s never come back.”

A change came over Lady Caroline Sellwood. She drew her chair a little nearer, and she favoured Claude Lafont with a kindlier glance than he had had from her since Easter.

“Something may have happened,” whispered Lady Caroline, hopefully.

“That’s just it. Something must have happened.”

“But something dreadful! Only last season there was a man killed in the Row! Was he—a very rough diamond, Claude?”

“Very.”

Lady Caroline sighed complacently.

“But you can’t help liking him,” hastily
added Claude, "and I hope to goodness nothing serious is the matter!"

"Of course, so do I. That goes without saying."

"Nor is he at all a likely man to be thrown. He has lived his life in the saddle. By the way, he brought his own old bush-saddle with him, and it appears that he insisted on riding out in that too."

"You see, Claude, it's a pity you didn't leave him in the bush; he's evidently devoted to it still."

"He is—that's the trouble; he has already spoken of bolting back there. My fear is that he may even now be suiting the action to the word."

"Don't tell me that," said Lady Caroline, whose head was still full of her first theory.

"It's what I fear; he's just the sort of fellow to go back by the first boat, if the panic took him. He showed signs of a panic last night. You see, he's only just beginning to realise what his position here will mean. And it frightens him; it may have frightened him out of our sight once and for all."
Lady Caroline shook her head.

"My fear is that he has broken his neck! And if he has, depend upon it, sad as it would be, it would still be for the best. That's what I always say: everything is for the best," repeated Lady Caroline, pensively gazing at Claude's handsome head. "However," she added, as the door opened, "here's Olivia; go and ask her what she thinks. I am prepared for the worst. And pray stop, dear Claude, and let us talk the matter over after the others have gone. We may know the worst by that time. And we have seen nothing of you this season!"

Olivia looked charming. She was also kind to Claude; but she entirely declined to embrace her mother's dark view of the Duke's disappearance. On the other hand, she was inconveniently inquisitive about his looks and personality, and Claude had to say many words for his cousin before he could get in one for himself. However, he did at length contrive to speak of his new volume of poems. It was just out. He was having a copy of the exceedingly limited large-paper edition specially bound in vellum for Olivia's acceptance. Olivia seemed pleased, and
apart from his anxiety Claude had not felt so happy for weeks. They were allowed to talk to each other until the rooms began to fill.

It was a very good Wednesday; but then the season was at its height. The gathering comprised the usual measure of interesting and interested persons, and the former had made their names upon as many different fields as ever. Claude had a chat with his friend, Edmund Stubbs, a young man with an unhealthy skin and a vague reputation for immense cleverness. They spoke of the poems. Stubbs expressed a wish to see the large-paper edition, which was not yet for sale, as did Ivor Llewellyn, the impressionist artist, who was responsible for the “decorations” in most volumes of contemporary minor verse, Claude's included. Claude was injudicious enough to invite both men to his rooms that night. The Impressionist was the most remarkable-looking of all Lady Caroline's guests. He wore a curled fringe and a flowing tie, and pince-nez attached to his person by a broad black ribbon. His pale face was prematurely drawn, and he showed his gums in a deathly grin at the many hard things which Stubbs muttered at the
expense of all present whom he knew by sight. Claude had a high opinion of both these men, but for once he was scarcely in tune for their talk, which was ever at a sort of artistic-intellectual concert-pitch. The Duke was to be forgotten in the society of Olivia only. Claude therefore edged away, trod on the skirts of a titled divorcée, got jammed between an Irish member and a composer of comic songs, and was finally engaged in conversation by the aged police magistrate, Sir Joseph Todd.

Sir Joseph had lowered his elephantine form into a chair beside the tea-table, where he sat, with his great cane between his enormous legs, munching cake like a school-boy and winking at his friends. He winked at Claude. The magistrate had been a journalist, and a scandalous Bohemian, so he said, in his young days; he had given Claude introductions and advice when the latter took to his pen. He, also, inquired after the new book, but rather grimly, and expressed himself with the rough edge of his tongue on the subject of modern "poets" and "poetry": the inverted commas were in his voice.

"You young spring poets," said he, "are too
tender by half; you’re all white meat together. You may say that’s no reason why I should have my knife in you. Why didn’t you say it? A bad joke would be a positive treat from you precious young fellows of to-day. And you give us bad lyrics instead, in limited editions; that’s the way it takes you now.”

Claude laughed; he was absurdly good-humoured under hostile criticism, a quality of which some of his literary friends were apt to take advantage. On this occasion, however, his unconcern was partly due to inattention. While listening to his old friend he was thinking still of the Duke.

“I’m sorry you would be a poet, Claude,” the magistrate continued. “The price of poets has gone down since my day. And you’d have done so much better in the House—by which, of course, I mean the House we all thought you were bound for. Has he—has he turned up yet?”

“Oh yes; he’s in England,” replied Claude, with discretion.

Sir Joseph pricked his ears, but curbed his tongue. Of all the questions that gathered on
his lips, only one was admissible, even in so old a friend as himself.

"A family man?"

"No; a bachelor."

"Capital! We shall see some fun, eh?" chuckled Sir Joseph, gobbling the last of his last slice. "What a quarry—what a prize! I was reminded of him only this morning, Claude. I had an Australian up before me—a most astounding fellow! An escaped bushranger, I should call him; looked as if he'd been cut straight out of a penny dreadful; never saw such a man in my life. However—"

Claude was not listening; his preoccupation was this time palpable. The mouth of him was open, and his eyes were fixed; the police magistrate followed their lead, with double eye-glasses in thick gold frames; and then his mouth opened too.

Her guests were making way for Lady Caroline Sellwood, who was leading towards the tea-table, by his horny hand, none other than the ninth Duke of St. Osmund's himself. Her Ladyship's face was radiant with smiles; yet the Duke was just as he had been the day before, as
unkempt, as undressed (his Crimean shirt had a flannel collar, but no tie), as round-shouldered; with his nose and ears still flayed by the sun; and the notorious wideawake tucked under his arm.

"He has come straight from the bush," her Ladyship informed everybody (as though she meant some shrub in the Square garden), "and just as he is. I call it so sweet of him! You know you'll never look so picturesque again, my dear Duke!"

Olivia followed with the best expression her frank face could muster. Claude took his cousin's hand in a sudden hush.

"Where in the world have you been?" broke from him before them all.

"Been? I've been run in," replied the Duke, with a smack of his bearded grinning lips.

"Tea or coffee, Duke?" said Lady Caroline, all smiling tolerance. "Tea? A cup of tea for the Duke of St. Osmund's. And where do you say you have been?"

"Locked up!" said his Grace. "In choky, if you like it better!"

Lady Caroline herself led the laugh. The
situation was indeed worthy of her finely tempered steel, her consummate tact, her instinctive dexterity. Many a grander dame would have essayed to quell that incriminating tongue. Not so Lady Caroline Sellwood. She took her Australian wild bull very boldly by the horns.

"I do believe," she cried, "that you are what we have all of us been looking for—in real life—all our days. I do believe you are the shocking Duke of those dreadful melodramas in the flesh at last! What was your crime? Ah! I've no doubt you cannot tell us!"

"Can I not?" cried the Duke, as Claude stopped him, unobserved, from pouring his tea into the saucer. "I'll tell you all about it, and perhaps you'll show me where the crime comes in, for I'm bothered if I see it yet. All I did was to have a gallop along one of your streets; I don't even know which street it was; but there's a round clearing at one end, then a curve, and then another clearing at the far-end."

"Regent Street," murmured Claude.

"That's the name. Well, it was quite early, there was hardly anybody about, so I thought surely to goodness there could be no harm in a
gallop; and I had one from clearing to clearing. Blowed if they didn't run me in for that! They kept me locked up all the morning. Then they took me before a fat old joker who did nothing much but wink. That old joker, though, he let me off, so I've nothing agen' him. He's a white man, he is. So here I am at last, having got your invitation to lunch, ma'am, just half an hour ago."

Sir Joseph Todd had been making fruitless efforts to rise, unaided, from his chair; he now caught Claude's arm, and simultaneously, the eye of the Duke.

"Jumping Moses!" roared Jack; "why, there he is! I beg your pardon, mister; but who'd have thought of finding you here?"

"This is pleasing," muttered Edmund Stubbs, in the background, to his friend the Impressionist. "I've seen the lion and the lamb lie down here together before to-day. But nothing like this!"

The Impressionist whipped out a pencil and bared a shirt-cuff. No one saw him. All eyes were upon the Duke and the magistrate, who were shaking hands.
“You have paid me a valuable compliment,” croaked Sir Joseph gaily. “Of course I winked! Hadn’t I my Lord Duke’s little peccadillo to wink at?”

And he bowed himself away under cover of his joke, which also helped Lady Caroline of enormous. The Duke mentioned the name by which he would go down to posterity on a metropolitan charge-sheet. Most people resumed their conversation. A few still laughed. And the less seriously the whole matter was taken, the better, of course, for all concerned, particularly the Duke. Olivia had him in hand now. And her mother found time to exchange a few words with Claude Lafont.

“A dear fellow, is he not? So natural! Such an example in that way to us all! How many of us would carry ourselves as well in— in our bush garments?” speculated her ladyship, for the benefit of more ears than Claude’s. Then her voice sank and trembled. “Take him away, Claude,” she gasped below her breath. “Take him away!”

“I intend to,” he whispered, nodding, “when I get the chance.”
“But not only from here—from town as well. Carry him off to the Towers! And when you get him there, for Heaven’s sake keep him there, and take him in hand, and we will all come down in August to see what you have done.”

“I’m quite agreeable, of course; but what if he isn’t?”

“He will be. You can do what you like with him. I have discovered that already; he asked at once if you were here, and said how he liked you. Claude, you are so clever and so good! If anyone can make him presentable, it is you!” She was wringing her white hands whiter yet.

“I’ll do my best, for all our sakes. I must say I like my material.”

“Oh, he’s a dear fellow!” cried Lady Caroline, dropping her hands and uplifting her voice once more. “So original—in nothing more than in his moral courage—his superiority to mere conventional appearances! That is a lesson—”

Lady Caroline stopped with a little scream. In common with others, she had heard the high, shrill mewing of a kitten; but cats were a special aversion of her Ladyship’s.
"What was that?" she cried, tugging instinctively at her skirts.

"Meow!" went the shrill small voice again; and all eyes fastened upon the Duke of St. Osmund's, whose ready-made coat-tails were moving like a bag of ferrets.

The Duke burst into a hearty laugh, and diving in his coat-tail pocket, produced the offending kitten in his great fist. Lady Caroline Sellwood took a step backward; and because she did not lead it, there was no laugh this time from her guests; and because there was no laugh but his own, the Duke looked consciously awkward for the first time. In fact, it was the worst moment yet; the next, however, Olivia's pink palms were stretched out for the kitten, and Olivia's laughing voice was making the sweetest music that ever had gladdened the heart of the Duke.

"The little darling!" cried the girl with genuine delight. "Let me have it, do!"

He gave it to her without a word, but with eyes that clung as fast to her face as the tiny claws did to her dress. Olivia's attention was all for the kitten; she was serenely unconscious
of that devouring gaze; but Claude saw it, and winced. And Lady Caroline saw it too.

"Poor mite!" pursued Olivia, stroking the bunch of black fur with a cheek as soft. "What a shame to keep it smothered up in a stuffy pocket! Are you fond of cats?" she asked the Duke.

"Am I not! They were my only mates up the bush. I brought over three besides the kitten."

"You brought them from the bush?"

"I did so!"

Olivia looked at him; his eyes had never left her; she dropped hers, and caressed the kitten.

"I put that one in my pocket," continued the Duke, "because I learned Livingstone to ride in front of me when he was just such another little 'un. But he'd done a bolt in the night; I found him just now with his three working paws black with your London soot; but he wasn't there when I got up, so I took the youngster. P'r'aps it wasn't over kind. It won't happen again. He's yours!"

"The kitten?"
“Why, certainly.”

“To keep?”

“If you will. I'd be proud!”

“Then I am proud. And I'll try to be as kind to it as you would have been.”

“You're uncommon kind to me,” remarked the Duke, irrelevantly. “So are you all,” he added in a ringing voice, as he drew himself up to his last inch, and for once stood clear of the medium height. “I never knew that there were so many of you here, or I'd have kept away. I'm just as I stepped off of the ship. I went aboard pretty much as I left the bush; if you'll make allowances for me this time, it shan't happen again. You don't catch me twice in a rig like this! Meanwhile, it's very kind of you all not to laugh at a fellow. I'm much obliged to you. I am so. And I hope we shall know each other better before long!”

Claude was not ashamed of him then. There was no truer dignity beneath the ruffles and periwigs of their ancestors in the Maske picture gallery than that of the rude, blunt fellow who could face modestly and yet kindly a whole roomful of well-dressed Londoners. It

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did not desert him as he shook hands with Lady Caroline and Olivia. In another moment the Duke was gone, and of his own accord, before he had been twenty minutes in the house. And what remained of that Wednesday afternoon fell flat and stale—always excepting the little formula with which Lady Caroline Sellwood sped her parting guests.

"Poor fellow," it ran, "he has roughed it so dreadfully in that horrible bush! You won't know him the next time you see him. Yes, I assure you, he went straight on board at that end and came straight to us at this! Not a day for anything in Melbourne or here. Actually not one day! I thought it so dear of him to come as he was. Didn't you?"