CHAPTER V.

WITH THE ELECT.

The ragged beard had been trimmed to a point; the uncouth hair had been cut, shampooed, and invested with a subtle, inoffensive aroma; and a twenty-five-shilling Lincoln and Bennett crowned all without palpable incongruity. The brown, chapped neck, on the other hand, did look browner and rougher than before in the cold clutch of a gleaming stand-up collar. And a like contrast was observable between the ample cuffs of a brand new shirt, and the Duke's hands, on whose hirsute backs the yellow freckles now stood out like half-sovereigns. Jack drew the line at gloves. On the whole, however, his docility had passed all praise; he even consented to burden himself with a most superfluous Inverness cape, all for the better concealment of the ready-made suit. In fine, a few hours had made quite a painfully new man of him; yet perhaps the only real loss was
that of his good spirits; and these he had left, not in any of the shops to which Claude had taken him before dinner, but, since then, in his own house in Belgrave Square.

Claude had shown him over it between nine and ten; they were now arm-in-arm on their way from this errand, and the street-lamps shone indifferently on the Duke's dejection and on Claude's relief. He had threatened instant occupation of his own town house; he had conceived nightmare hospitalities towards all and sundry, and had stuck to his guns against argument with an obstinacy which made Claude's hair stand on end. Now the Duke had less to say. He had seen his house. The empty, echoing, inhospitable rooms, with perhaps a handful of electric lights freezing out of the darkness as they entered, had struck a chill to his genial heart. And Claude knew it as he led the way to his own cosy chambers; but was reminded of another thing as he approached them, and became himself, on the spot, a different man.

He had forgotten the two friends he had invited to come in for a private view of the
large-paper edition. He was reminded of them by seeing from the street his open window filled with light; and his manner had entirely altered when he detained the Duke below, and sought with elaborate phrases to impress him beforehand with the transcendent merits of the couple whom he was about to meet. Jack promptly offered to go away. He had never heard tell of Impressionism, and artists were not in his line. What about the other joker? What did he do?

"Nothing, my dear fellow; he's far too good a man to do things," explained Claude, whose changed speech inclined the other to flight quite as much as his account of the men upstairs. "The really delicate brains—the most highly sensitised souls—seldom spend themselves upon mere creative work. They look on, and possibly criticise—that is, when they meet with aught worthy their criticism. My friend, Edmund Stubbs, is such a one. He has a sensitised soul, if you like! His artistic standard is too high, he is too true to his ideals, to produce the imperfect. He is full of ideas; but they are too big for brush, pen, or chisel to express them."
On the other hand, he's a very fountain of inspiration, tempered by critical restraint, to many a man whose name (as my own) is possibly a household word in Clapham, where poor Edmund's is unknown. Not that I should pity him on that score; he has a holy scorn for what himself would call a 'suburban popularity'; and, indeed, I am not with him in his views as to the indignity of fame generally. But there, he is a bright particular star who is content to shine for the favoured few who have the privilege of calling him their friend."

"You do talk like a book, and no error!" said the Duke. "I haven't ever heard you gas on like that before."

The bright particular star was discovered in Claude's easiest chair, with the precious volume in one hand, and a tall glass, nearly empty, in the other; the Impressionist was in the act of replacing the stopper in the whisky-decanter; and Claude accepted the somewhat redundant explanation, that they were making themselves at home, with every sign of approval. Nor was he slow in introducing his friends;
but for once the Duke was refreshingly subdued, if not shy; and for the first few minutes the others had their heads together over the large-paper edition, for whose "decorations" the draughtsman himself had not the least to say, where all admired. At length Claude passed the open volume to his cousin; needless to say it was open at the frontispiece; but the first and only thing that Jack saw was the author's name in red capitals on the title-page opposite.

"Claude Lafont!" he read out. "Why, you don't ever mean—to tell me—that's you, old brusher?"

Claude smiled and coloured.

"You an author!" continued the Duke in a wide-eyed wonder. "And you never told me! Well, no wonder you can talk like a book when you can write one, too! So this is your latest, is it?"

"The limited large-paper edition," said Claude. "Only seventy-five copies printed, and I sign them all. How does it strike you—physically, I mean?"

"'Physically' is quite pleasing," murmured Stubbs; and Claude helped him to more whisky.
Jack looked at the book. The back was of a pale brown cardboard; the type had a curious, olden air about it; the paper was thick, and its edges elaborately ragged. The Duke asked if it was a new book. It looked to him a hundred years old, he said, and discovered that he had paid a pretty compliment unawares.

"There's one thing, however," he added: "we could chop leaves as well as that in the back-blocks!"

The Impressionist grinned; his friend drank deep, with a corrugated brow; the poet expounded the beauties of the rough edge, and Jack gave him back his book.

"I know nothing about it," said he; "but still, I'm proud of you, I am so. And I'm proud," he added, "to find myself in such company as yours, gentlemen; though I don't mind telling you, if I'd known I'd be the only plain man in the room I'd never have come upstairs!"

And the Duke sat down in a corner, with his knife, his tobacco and his cutty-pipe, as shy as a great boy in a roomful of girls. Yet this wore off, for the conversation of the elect
did not, after all, rarefy the atmosphere to oppression; indeed, that of the sensitised soul contained more oaths than Jack had heard from one mouth since he left the bush, and this alone was enough to put him at his ease. At the same time he was repelled, for it appeared to be a characteristic of the great Stubbs to turn up his nose at all men; and as that organ was retroussé to begin with, Jack was forcibly reminded of some ill-bred, snarling bull-dog, and he marvelled at the hound’s reputation. He put in no word, however, until the conversation turned on Claude’s poems, and a particularly cool, coarse thing was said of one of them, and Claude only laughed. Then he did speak up.

“See here, mister,” he blurted out from his corner. “Could you do as good?”

Stubbs stared at the Duke, and drained his glass.

“I shouldn’t try,” was his reply.

“I wouldn’t,” retorted Jack. “I just wouldn’t, if I were you.”

Stubbs could better have parried a less indelicate, a less childish thrust; as it was,
he reached for his hat. Claude interfered at once.

"My dear old fellow," said he to Jack, "you mustn't mind what my friend Edmund says of my stuff. I like it. He is always right, for one thing; and then, only think of the privilege of having such a critic to tell one exactly what he thinks."

Jack looked from one man to the other. The sincerity of the last speech was not absolutely convincing, but that of Claude's feeling for his friend was obvious enough; and, with a laugh, the Duke put his back against the door. The apology which he delivered in that position was in all respects characteristic. It was unnecessarily full; it was informed alike by an extravagant good-will towards mankind, and an irritating personal humility; and it ended, somewhat to Claude's dismay, with a direct invitation to both his friends to spend a month at Maske Towers.

Perhaps these young men realised then, for the first time, who the rough fellow was, after all, with whom they had been thrown in contact. At all events the double invitation
was accepted with alacrity; and no more hard things were said of Claude’s lyrics. The flow of soul was henceforth as uninterrupted as that of the whisky down the visitors’ throats. And no further hitch would have occurred had the Impressionist not made that surreptitious sketch of the Duke, which so delighted his friends.

“Oh, admirable!” cried Claude. “A most suggestive humouresque!”

“It’ll do,” said Stubbs, the oracle. “It mightn’t appeal to the suburbs, damn them, but it does to us.”

“Grant the convention, and the art is perfect,” continued Claude, with the tail of his eye on Jack.

“It is the caricature that is more like than life,” pursued Stubbs, with a sidelong glance in the same direction.

Jack saw these looks; but from his corner he could not see the sketch, nor had he any suspicion of its subject. All else that he noted was the flush of triumph, or it may have been whisky, or just possibly both, on the pale, fringed face of Impressionism. He held out
his hand for the half-sheet of paper on which the sketch had been made.

"I hope it won't offend you," exclaimed the artist, hesitating.

"Offend me! Why should it? Let's have a look!"

And he looked for more than a minute at the five curves and a beard which had expressed to quicker eyes the quintessence of his own outward and visible personality. At first he could make nothing of them; even when an interpretation dawned upon him, his face was puzzled as he raised it to the trio hanging on his words.

"It won't do, mister," said the Duke, reluctantly. "You'll never get saplings like them," tapping the five curves with his forefinger, "to hold a nest like that," putting his thumb on the beard, "and don't you believe it."

There was a moment's silence. Then the Impressionist said thickly:

"Give me that sketch."

Jack handed it back. In another moment it was littering the ground in four pieces, and
the door had banged behind the indignant draughtsman.

"What on earth have I done?" cried the Duke, aghast.

"You have offended Llewellyn," replied Claude, shortly.

"How? By what I said? I'll run after him this minute and apologise. I never meant to hurt his feelings. Where's that stove-pipe hat?"

"Let me go," said Stubbs, getting up. "I understand the creative animal; it is thin-skinned; but I'll tell our friend what you say."

"I wish you would. Tell him I meant no harm. And fetch him down with you just whenever you can come."

"Thanks—that will be very pleasing! I dare-say August will be our best time, but we shall let you know. I'll put it all right with Ivor; but these creative asses (saving your presence, Lafont), never can see a joke."

"A joke!" cried Jack, when he and Claude were alone.

"Stubbs is ironical," said Claude severely.

"Look here," said the Duke, "what are you givin' us, old boy? Seems to me you clever
touchers have been getting at a cove between you. Where does this joke come in, eh?"

And his good faith was so obvious that Claude picked up the four quarters of torn paper, fitted them together, and entered upon yet another explanation. This one, however, was somewhat impatiently given and received. The Duke professed to think his likeness exceedingly unlike—when, indeed, he could be got to see his own outlines at all—and Claude disagreeing, a silence fell between the pair. Jack sought to break it by taking off his collar (which had made him miserable) and putting it in his pocket with a significant look; but the act provoked no comment. So the two men sat, the one smoking cigarettes, the other his cutty, but neither speaking, nor yet reading a line. And the endless roar of Piccadilly, reaching them through the open windows, emphasised their silence, until suddenly it sank beneath the midnight chimes of the city clocks. In another minute a tiny, tinkling echo came from Claude's chimney-piece, and the Duke put down his pipe and spoke.

“My first whole day in London—a goner,” he
said; "and a pretty full day it's been. Listen to
this for one day's work," and as he rehearsed
them, he ticked off the events on his great brown
fingers. "Got run in—that's number one.
Turned up among a lot of swells in my old duds
—number two. Riled the cleverest man you
know—number three—so that he nearly cleared
out of your rooms; and, not content with that,
hurt the feelings of the second cleverest (present
company excepted) so that he did clear—which
is number four. Worst of all, riled you, old man,
and hurt your feelings too. That's the finisher.
And see here, Claude, it isn't good enough and it
won't do. I won't wash in London, and I'm full
up of the hole; as for my own house, it gave me
the fair hump the moment I put my nose inside;
and I'd be on to make tracks up the bush any
day you like—if it weren't for one thing."
"What's that," said Claude, "if it's a fair
question?"
The other concealed his heightened colour by
relighting his pipe and puffing vigorously.
"I'll tell you," said he; "it's that old girl and
—what's the daughter's name again?"
"Olivia."
"Olivia. A beautiful name for a beautiful girl! She's all that and more."

"And much more."

"You see, she's as good inside as out; she has a kind heart."

"I have always found it so," said Claude, "and I've known her since she was a child."

The two kinsmen, who had been so wide apart a few minutes since, were now more than ever mutually akin. They drew their chairs together; but the touchstone was deep down in either heart.

"You knew her when she was a child!" repeated the Duke in a kind of awe. "Yes; and I daresay, now, you used to play with her, and perhaps take her on your knee, and even pull her hair and kiss her in them old days. Yet there you sit smoking cigarettes!"

His own pipe was out. He was in a reverie. Claude also had his own thoughts.

"The one thing was this," said the Duke at length: "would the old woman and her daughter come to see us up the country?"

Claude was torn two ways. The Towers
scheme was no longer his first anxiety. He returned to it by an effort.

"They would," he said. "Lady Caroline told me so. They would come like a shot in August. She said so herself."

"Would you put me up to things in the meantime? Would you be showing me the ropes?"

"The very thing I should like to do, so far as I am able."

"Then we'll start to-morrow—I mean to-day. That settles it. And yet——"

"Out with it," said Claude, smiling.

"Well, I will. I mean no harm, you understand. Who am I to dare to look at her? Only I do feel as if that girl would do me a deal of good down there—you know, in making me more the sort of chap for my billet. But if she's gone and got a sweetheart, he might very easily object; so I just thought I'd like to know."

"She hasn't one, to my knowledge," said Claude at length.

"Is that a fact?" cried the Duke. "Well, I don't know what all you fellows are thinking of, but I do know that I am jolly glad. Not from
any designs of my own, mind you—I haven't as much cheek as all that—but to save trouble. Do you know, Claudy, I've had a beast of a thought off and on all the night?"

"No; what was that?"

"Why, I half suspected she was your own girl."