CHAPTER VI.
A NEW LEAF.

"The Duke of St. Osmund's and Mr. Claude Lafont left town yesterday for Maske Towers, the family seat near Devenholme." So ran the announcement in the morning papers of the next day but one. And the Duke was actually exploring his inheritance when it appeared.

Overnight the pair had arrived too late to see much more than the lofty, antique hall and the respective rooms in which they were to sup and sleep; but the birds awoke Jack in the early morning, and he was up and out before seven o'clock.

As yet he had seen little that attracted him within, and at this hour he felt a childish horror of the dark colossal canvases overhanging the grand staircase and the hall; like the sightless suits of armour standing blind sentinel below, they froze him with the look of lifeless life about the grim, gigantic figures. He was thankful to see one of the great double doors standing open
to the sun; it let him out into a portico loftier than the hall; and folding his arms across a stone balustrade, the whilom bushman looked forth between Corinthian columns like the masts of a ship, and was monarch of all he beheld.

A broad and stately terrace ran right and left below; beyond and below this, acres of the smoothest, greenest sward were relieved by a few fine elms, with the deer still in clusters about their trunks. The lawn sloped quietly to the verdant shores of a noble lake; sun and dew had dusted the grass with silver; sun and wind were rippling the lake with flakes of flame like leaping gold-fish; and across the water, on the rising ground, a plantation of young pines ran their points into the radiant sky. These trees appealed to the Duke more than anything he had seen yet. His last bush hut had been built among pines; and such is the sentimental attraction of the human heart towards a former condition—better or worse, if it be but beyond recall—that the Duke of St. Osmund's had to inspect that plantation before anything else. Leaving the Towers behind him, unnoticed and indeed forgotten, he crossed the lawn, skirted
the lake, and plunged amid the pine-trees as his impulse spurred him. But on his way back a little later, the mellow grandeur of that ancient pile broke in upon him at last, and he stood astounded in the wet grass, the blood of possession running hot in his veins.

The historic building stretched on this side for something like a quarter of a mile from end to end. Here the blue sky sank deep between turret and spire, and there it picked out a line of crumbling battlements, or backed the upper branches of an elm that (from this point) cut the expanse of stone in two. It had grown out of many attempts in as many ages; thus, besides architectural discrepancies for the eyes of the few, the shading of the walls was as finely graduated as that of an aging beard, but the prevailing tint was a pearly grey, now washed with purple, and exquisitely softened by the tender haze still lingering in the dewy air. And from every window that Jack could see, flashed a morning sun; for as he stood and looked, his shadow lay in front of him along the milky grass.

To one extremity of the building clung an
enormous conservatory, likewise ablaze from dome to masonry; at the other, the dark hues of a shrubbery rested the eye; but that of the Duke was used to the sunlit desert, and not readily dazzled. His quick glance went like a bullet through the trees to a red gable and the gilt hands of a clock just visible beyond. On the instant he recovered from his enchantment, and set off for the shrubbery at a brisk walk; for he had heard much of the Maske stables, and evidently there they were.

As he was in the shrubbery, the stable clock struck eight after a melodious chime sadly spoilt by the incessant barking of some small dog; the last stroke reverberated as he emerged; and the dog had the morning air to itself, to murder with its hideous clamour. But the Duke now saw the exciting cause, and it excited him; for he had come out opposite the stable-yard gates, which were shut, but from the top of which, with its lame paw lifted, a vertical tail, and a back like a hedgehog asleep, his own yellow cat spat defiance at an unseen foe. And between the barks came the voice of a man inciting the dog with a filthy relish.
“Set him off, Pickle! Now’s your time. Try again. Oh, blow me, if you can’t you can’t, and I’ll have to lend you a hand.”

And one showed over the gate with the word, but the fingers grabbed the air, for Jack had snatched his pet in the nick of time. He was now busy with the ring of the latch, fumbling it in his fury. The breath came in gusts through his set teeth and bristling beard. One hand clasped the yellow cat in a fierce caress; the other knotted into a fist as the gate flew open.

In the yard a hulking, smooth-faced fellow whose pendulous under-lip had dropped in dismay, changed his stare for a grin when he saw the Duke, who was the smaller as well as the rougher-looking man of the two; for he had not only come out without his collar, which he discarded whenever he could; but he had clapped on the old bush wideawake because Claude was not up to stop him.

“Well, and who are you?” began the other, cheerfully.

“You take off your coat and I’ll show you,” replied Jack, with a bloodthirsty indistineticness.
"I'm a better man than you are, whoever I am; at least we'll have a see!"

"Oh, will we?" said the fellow. "And you're the better man, are you? What do you think?" he added, turning to a stable-boy who stood handy with thin brown arms akimbo, and thumbs in his belt.

"I wonder 'oo 'e thinks 'e is w'en 'e's at home?" said the lad.

Jack never heard him. He had spied the saddle-room door standing open. In an instant he was there, with the small dog yelping at his heels; in another, he had locked the door between cat and dog, pocketed the key, and returned to his man, stripping off his own coat and waistcoat as he came. He flung them into a corner, and after them his bush hat.

"Now let's see you take off yours! If you don't," added Jack, with a big bush oath, "I'll have to hide you with it on!"

But man and boy had been consulting while his back was turned, and Jack now found himself between the two of them; not that he gave the lad a thought.

"Look you here; I'll tell you who I am,"
said the man. "My name's Matt Hunt, and Matt can fight, as you wouldn't need telling if you belonged to these parts. But he don't take on stray tramps like you; so unless you hook it slippy, we're just going to run you out o' this yard quicker than you come in."

"Not till I've shown you how to treat dumb animals——"

"Then here goes!"

And with that the man Hunt seized one of Jack's arms, while the stable-boy nipped the other from behind, and made a dive at Jack's pocket for the saddle-room key. But a flat-footed kick sent the lad sprawling without harming him; and the man was driven so hard under the nose, that he too fell back, bearded with blood.

"Come on!" roared Jack. "And you, my boy, keep out of the light unless you want a whipping yourself!"

He was rolling up the sleeves from his tanned and furry arms. Hunt followed suit, a cascade of curses flowing with his blood; he had torn off his coat, and a wrist-button tinkled on the cement as he caught up Jack in his preparations.
His arms were thicker than the bushman's, though white and fleshy. Hunt was also the heavier weight, besides standing fully six feet as against the Duke's five-feet-nine when he held himself up. Nor was there any lack of confidence in the dripping, hairless, sinister face, when the two men finally squared up.

They fell to work without niggling, for Jack rushed in like a bull, leading most violently with his left. It was an inartistic start; the big man was not touched; but neither did he touch Jack, who displayed, at all events, a quick pair of legs. Yet it was this start that steadied the Duke. It showed him that Hunt was by no means unskilled in the use of his hands; and it put out of his head everything but the fight itself, so that he heard no more the small tike barking outside the saddle-room door, hitherto his angriest goad. Some cool sparring ensued. Then Hunt let out from the shoulder, but the blow was avoided with great agility; then Jack led off again, but with a lighter touch, and this time he drew his man. The blows of the next minute it was impossible to follow. They were given and returned with enormous virulence.
And there was no end to them until the big man tripped and fell.

"See here," said Jack, standing over him; "that was my cat, and I'd got to go for you. But if you've had enough of this game, so have I, and we'll cry quits."

He was sucking a cut lip as he spoke. The other spat out a tooth and blundered to his feet.

"Quits, you scum? Wait a bit!"

And they were at hotter work than ever.

Meanwhile the yard was filling with stablemen and gardeners, who were in time to see Hunt striding down on his unknown adversary, and the latter retreating in good order; but the stride quickened, ending in a rush, which the Duke eluded so successfully that he was able to hit Hunt hard on the ear as he passed.

It was afterwards a relief to the spectators to remember how they had applauded this effort. To the Duke their sympathy was a comfort at the time; though he no more suspected that his adversary was also his most unpopular tenant, than the latter dreamt of his being the Duke.

Hunt let out a bellow of pain, staggered, and
resumed his infuriate rush; but his punishment was now heavier than before. He had lost both wind and head, and he was losing pluck. One of his eyes was already retiring behind folds of livid flesh; and a final blow under the nose, where the first of all had been delivered, knocked him howling into the arms of a newcomer, who disengaged himself as Hunt fell.

"What, Claude, is that you?" cried the Duke; and a flood of new sensations so changed his voice, that Hunt looked up from where he lay, a beaten, bleeding, blubbering mass. But in the silent revelation of that moment there was at first no sound save the barking of the fox-terrier outside the saddle-room door. This had never ceased. Then the coachman's pipe fell from his mouth and was smashed.

"My God!" said he. "It's his Grace himself!"

He had driven the Duke from Devenholme the night before.

"The Duke of St. Osmund's!" exclaimed Hunt from the ground. He had been shedding blood and tears indifferently, and now he sat up with a slimy stare in his uninjured eye.
“Yes, that’s right,” said Jack, with a nod to the company. “So now you all know what to expect for cruelty to cats, or any other dumb animals; and don’t you forget it!”

He put on his coat and went over to the saddle-room. Claude followed him, still at a loss for words. And Hunt’s dog went into a wild ecstasy as the key was put into the lock.

“Hold him,” said Jack. “The dog’s all right; and I lay his master’ll think twice before he sets him on another cat o’ mine.”

“Come away,” said Claude hoarsely; “for all our sakes, come away before you make bad worse!”

“Well, I will. Only hold him tight. That’s it. Poor little puss, then—poor old Livingston! Now I’m ready; come along.”

But Hunt was in their path; and Jack’s heart smote him for the mischief he had done, though his own lower lip was swollen like a sausage.

“So you’re the new Duke of St. Osmund’s,” said Hunt, with a singular deliberation. “I wasn’t to know that, of course; no, by gosh, not likely!”
"Well, you know it now," was the reply.
"And—and I'm sorry I had to hit you so hard, Hunt!"

"Oh, don't apologise," said Hunt, with a sneer that showed a front tooth missing. "Stop a bit, though; I'm not so sure," he added, with a glance of evil insight.

"Sure of what?"

"Whether you oughtn't to apologise for not hitting a man of your own age!"

"Take no notice of him," whispered Claude, strenuously; but he obtained none himself.

"Nonsense," said the Duke; "you're the younger man, at all events."

"Am I? I was born in '59, I was."

"Then according to all accounts you're the younger man by four years."

"By—four—years," repeated Hunt, slowly.

"So you were born in '55! Thank you; I shall make a note of that, you may be sure—your Grace!"

And Hunt was gone; they heard him whistling for his tike when he was himself out of sight, and the dog went at last. Then the coachman stepped forward, cap in hand.
“If you please, your Grace, that man was here without my knowledge. He’s always putting in his nose where he isn’t wanted; I’ve shifted him out of this before to-day; and with your Grace’s permission, I’ll give orders not to have him admitted again.”

“Who is he?” said Jack. “A tenant or what?”

“Only a tenant, your Grace. Matt Hunt, they call him, of the Lower Farm; but it might be of Maske Towers, by the way he goes on!”

“He took a mighty interest in my age,” remarked the Duke. “I never asked to look at his fangs—but I think you’ll find one of them somewhere about the yard. No; I’m not fond of fighting, my lads. Don’t you run away with that idea. But there’s one thing I can’t and won’t suffer, and that’s cruelty to animals. You chaps in the stables recollect that! And so good-morning to you all.”

Claude led the way through the shrubbery in a deep depression. The guilty Duke took his arm with one hand, while with the other he hugged the yellow cat, that was eyeing the
shrubbery birds over its master's shoulder, much as the terrier had eyed it.

"My dear old boy," said Jack, "I'm as sorry as sorry for what's happened. But I couldn't help myself. Look at Livingstone; he'd have been a stiff 'un by this time if I hadn't turned up when I did; so naturally there was a row. Still I'm sorry. I know it's a bad beginning; and I remember saying in the train that I'd turn over a new leaf down here. Well, and so I will if you give me time. Don't judge me by this morning, Claude. Give me another chance; and for God's sake don't look like that!"

"I can't help it, Jack," replied Claude, with a weary candour. "I'm prepared for anything now. You make me a year older every day. How do I know what you'll do next? I think the best thing I can do is to give you up as a bad job."