CHAPTER VII.
THE DUKE'S PROGRESS.

Claude's somewhat premature despair was not justified by the event; nevertheless it did good. Excusable enough at the time, that little human outbreak was also more effective than the longest lecture or the most mellifluous reproof. Jack liked his cousin. The liking was by no means unconnected with gratitude. And now Jack saw that he could best show his gratitude by adopting a more suitable course of conduct than he could claim to have pursued hitherto. He determined to make an effort. He had everything to learn; it was a mountainous task that lay before him; but he faced it with spirit, and made considerable progress in a little space.

He learnt how to treat the servants. The footmen had misbehaved when he addressed them as "my boy" and "old toucher" from his place at table. He consulted Claude, and dropped these familiarities as well as the painfully respectful tone which he had at first
employed towards old Stebbings, the butler. Stebbings had been very many years in the family. The deference inspired by his venerable presence was natural enough in the new Duke of St. Osmund's; but it shocked and distressed Stebbings's feudal soul. He complained to Claude, and he had not to complain twice. For Jack discovered a special and a touching eagerness to master the rudiments of etiquette; though in other respects (which certainly mattered less) he was still incorrigible.

His social "crammer" could no more cure him of his hatred of a collar than of his liking for his cats. The latter were always with him; the former, unhappily, was not. In these things the Duke was hopelessly unregenerate; he was a stockman still at heart, and a stockman he threatened to remain. The soft summer nights were nothing to the nights in the bush; the fleecy English sky was not blue at all after the skies of Riverina; and the Duke's ideal of a man was "my old boss." Claude heard of "my old boss" until he was sick of the words, which constituted a gratuitous reminder of a position most men would have been glad to forget. Yet
there was much to be thankful for. There were no more scenes such as the Duke’s set-to in his own stable-yard with one of his own tenants. At least nothing of the sort happened again until Jack’s next collision with Matthew Hunt. And that was not yet.

Matthew was from home when the Duke, making a round of the estate, with his agent, visited the Lower Farm in its turn. Old Hunt, Matthew’s besotted father, received them in the kitchen with a bloodshot stare and little else, for drink had long dimmed his forces. Not so the old man’s daughter-in-law, Matthew’s wife, who showed the visitors all over the farm in a noiseless manner that made Jack feel uneasy, because he never knew when she was or was not at his elbow. Besides, he could not forget the thrashing he had given her husband, nor yet suppose that she had forgotten it either. The woman was of a gross type strangely accentuated by her feline quietude. She had a continual smile, and sly eyes that dropped when they encountered those of the Duke, whom they followed sedulously at all other moments. Jack seemed to know it, too; at all events he was
not sorry to turn his back upon the Lower Farm.

"A rum lot, the Hunts!" he said at lunch. "They're about the only folks here that I haven't cottoned to on the spot. I shall get on fine with all the others. But I can't suffer those Hunts!"

"There's no reason why you should suffer them," observed the agent, in his well-bred drawl; for he had a more aristocratic manner than Claude himself. "They have the best farm on the property, and they pay the smallest rent. You should think over my suggestion of this morning."

"No, no," said the Duke. "He wants me to double the rent, Claude, and clear them out if they won't pay. I can't do it."

"Well, no; I hardly think you can," assented Claude. "Oddly enough, my grandfather had quite a weakness for the Hunts; and then they are very old tenants. That hoary-headed Silenus, whom you saw, was once in the stables here; so was his son after him, in my time; and the old man's sister was my grandmother's maid. You can't turn out people like that,
ex itinere, so to speak—I mean to say in a hurry. It's too old a connection altogether."

"Exactly what they trade upon," said the agent. "They have been spoilt for years, and they expect his Grace to go on spoiling them. I should certainly get rid of the whole gang."

"No, mister—no!" declared the Duke. "Claude is right. I can't do it. I might if I hadn't given that fellow a hiding. After that I simply can't; it would look too bad."

The agent said no more, but his look and shrug were perhaps neither politic nor polite. A strapping sportsman himself, and a person of some polish into the bargain, he was in a position, as it were, to look down on Claude with one eye, and on the Duke with the other. And he did so with a freedom extraordinary in one of his wisdom and understanding.

"One of these days," said Jack, "I shall give that joker his cheque. He's not my notion of an overseer at all; if he's too good for the billet, let him roll up his swag and clear out; if he isn't, let him treat the bosses as a blooming overseer should."

"Why, what's the head and chief of his
offending now?" asked Claude; for this was one night in the billiard-room, when the agent had been making an example of both cousins at pyramids; it was after he was gone, and while the Duke was still tearing off his collar.

"What has he said to-night?" continued the poet, less poetically. "I heard nothing offensive."

"You wouldn't," said the Duke; "you're such a good sort yourself. You'd never see when a chap was pulling your leg, but I see fast enough, and I won't have it. What did he say to-night? He talked through his neck when we missed our shots. That about billiards in the bush I didn't mind; me and the bush, we're fair game; but when he got on to your poetry, old man, I felt inclined to run my cue through his gizzard. 'A poet's shot,' he says, when you put yourself down; and 'you should write a sonnet about that;' when you got them three balls in together. I don't say it wasn't a fluke. That has nothing at all to do with it. The way the fellow spoke is what I weaken on. He wouldn't have done for my old boss, and I'm blowed if he'll do for me. One of these days I
shall tell him to come outside and take his coat off; and, by the looks of him, I shouldn't be a bit surprised to see him put me through."

Claude's anxiety overcame every other feeling. He implored the Duke not to make another scene, least of all with such a man as the agent, whose chaff, he truly protested, did not offend him in the least. Jack shook his head, and was next accused of being more sensitive about the "wretched poems" than was the poet himself. This could not have been. But Claude was not so very far wrong.

His slender book was being widely reviewed, or rather "noticed," for the two things are not quite the same. The "notices," on the whole, were good and kind, but "uninstructed," so Claude said with a sigh; nevertheless, he appeared to obtain a sneaking satisfaction from their perusal; and as for Jack, he would read them aloud, capering round the room and shaking Claude by both hands in his delighted enthusiasm. To him every printed compliment was a loud note blown from the trumpet of fame into the ears of all the world. He would hear not a word against the paper in which it
appeared, but attributed every qualifying remark of Claude's to the latter's modesty, and each favourable paragraph to some great responsible critic voicing the feeling of the country in the matter of these poems. Claude himself, however, though frequently gratified, was not deceived; for the sweetest nothings came invariably from the provincial press; and he at least knew too much to mistake a "notice" for a "real review."

The real reviews were a sadly different matter. There were very few of them, in the first place; their scarcity was worse than their severity. And they were generally very severe indeed; or they did not take the book seriously, which, as Claude said, was the unkindest cut of all.

"Only show me the skunk who wrote that," exclaimed Jack one morning, looking over Claude's shoulder as he opened his press-cuttings, "and I'll give him the biggest hiding ever he had in his life!"

Another critic, the writer of a really sympathetic and exhaustive review, the Duke desired to invite to Maske Towers by the next post,
“because,” said Jack, “he must be a real good sort, and we ought to know him.”

“I do know him,” said Claude, with a groan, for he had thought of keeping the fact to himself; “I know him to my cost. He owes me money. This is payment on account. Oh, I am no good! I must give it up! Ignorance and interest alone are at my back! Genuine enthusiasm there is none!”

There was Jack’s. But was that genuine? The Duke himself was not sure. He meant it to ring true, but then he meant to appreciate the poems, and of many of them he could make little enough in his secret soul.

All this, however, was but one side of the quiet life led by the cousins at Maske Towers; and it had but one important effect—that of sowing in Claude’s heart a loyalty to Jack not unworthy of Jack’s loyalty to him.

There were other subjects of discussion upon which the pair were by no means at one. There was Jack’s open failure to appreciate the marble halls, the resonant galleries, the darkling pictures of his princely home; and there was the scatter-brained scheme by which he
ultimately sought to counteract the oppressive grandeur of his new surroundings.

It was extremely irritating, especially to a man like Claude; but the proudest possessions of their ancestors (whose superlative taste and inferior morals had been the byword of so many ages) were those which appealed least to that blameless Goth, the ninth Duke of St. Osmund's. The most glaring case in point was that of the pictures, which alone would make the worldwide fame of a less essentially noble seat than Maske Towers. But Titian, Rembrandt, Rubens, Leonardo da Vinci, Andrea del Sarto, and Claude Lorraine—all these were mere names, and new ones, to Happy Jack. Claude Lafont, pointing to magnificent examples of the work of one Old Master after another, made his observations with bated breath, as well he might, for where is there such another private collection? Jack, however, was not impressed; he was merely amazed at Claude, and his remarks in the picture gallery are entirely unworthy of reproduction. In the State Apartments he was still more trying. He spoke of having the ancient tapestries (after
Raphael's Cartoons) taken out and "well shaken," which, as Claude said, would have reduced them to immediate atoms. And he threatened to have the painted ceilings white-washed without delay.

"Aurora Banishing Night, eh?" he cried, with horizontal beard and upturned eyes. "She'd jolly soon banish my night, certainly; it should be, banishing sleep! And all those naked little nippers! They ought to be papered over, for decency's sake; and that brute of a bed, who would sleep in it, I should like to know? Not me. Not much! It must be twenty-foot high and ten-foot wide; it gives me the hump to look at it, and the ceilings give it me worse. See here, Claude, we'll lock up these State Apartments, as you call them, and you shall keep the key. I'm full of 'em; they'll give me bad dreams as it is."

They were not, however, the only apartments of which the Duke disapproved; the suite which had been done up entirely for his own use, under Claude's direction, did not long commend itself to the ex-stockman. Everything was far too good for him and his cats; they were not
accustomed to such splendour; it made them all four uncomfortable—so Jack declared after taking Claude’s breath away with the eccentric plan on which he had set his heart. And for the remainder of their solitary companionship each man had his own occupation; the Duke preparing more congenial quarters for himself and the cats; and Claude, with Jack’s permission and the agent’s skilled advice, superintending the making of private golf-links for Mr. Sellwood’s peculiar behoof. For the Home Secretary had promised to join the Maske party, for the week-ends at any rate, until (as he expressed it) the Government “holed out.”

That party was now finally arranged. The Frekes were coming with the Sellwoods, and the latter family were to have the luxurious suite which the Duke himself disdained. This was his Grace’s own idea. Moreover, he interested himself personally in the right ordering of the rooms during the last few days; but this he kept to himself until the eleventh hour; in fact, until he was waiting for the drag to come round, which he was himself going to tool over to Devenholme to meet his guests. It was then that certain
unexpected misgivings led Jack to seek out his cousin, in order to take him to see what he had done.

For Claude had shown him what he was doing. He was producing a set of exceedingly harmless verses, "To Olivia released from Mayfair," of which the Duke had already heard the rough draft. The fair copy was in the making even now; in the comparatively small room, at one end of the library, that Jack had already christened the Poet's Corner.

Claude wiped his pen with characteristic care, and then rose readily enough. He followed Jack down the immensely long, galleried, book-lined library, through a cross-fire of coloured lights from the stained-glass windows, and so to the stairs. Overhead there was another long walk, through corridor after corridor, which had always reminded Jack of the hotel in town. But at last, in the newly decorated wing, the Duke took a key from his pocket and put it in a certain door. And now it was Claude who was reminded of the hotel; for a most striking atmospheric change greeted him on the threshold; only this time it was not
a gust of heat, but the united perfume of many flowers, that came from within.

The room was fairly flooded with fresh roses. It was as though they had either blown through the open window, or fallen in a miraculous shower from the dainty blue ceiling. They pranked the floor in a fine disorder. They studded the table in tiny vases. They hid the mantelpiece, embedded in moss; from the very grate below, they peeped like fairy flames, breathing fragrance instead of warmth; and some in falling seemed to have caught in the pictures on the walls, so artfully had they been arranged. Only the white narrow bed had escaped the shower. And in the midst of this his handiwork stood the Duke, and blushed like the roses themselves.

"Whose room is this?" asked Claude, though he knew so well.

"Olivia's—I should say Miss Sellwood's. You see, old man, you were writing these awfully clever verses for her; so I felt I should like to have something ready too."

"Your poem is the best!" exclaimed Claude, with envious, sparkling eyes. And then he sighed.
"Oh, rot!" said Jack, who was only too thankful for his offering to receive the cachet of Claude's approval. "All I wanted was to keep my end up too. Look here. What do you think of this?"

And he took from a vase on the dressing-table an enormous white bouquet, that opened Claude's eyes wider than before.

"This is for her, too; I wanted to consult you about it," pursued Jack. "Should I leave it here for her, or should I take it down to the station and present it to her there? Or at dinner to-night? I want to know just what you think."

"No, not at dinner," replied Claude; "nor yet at the station."

"Not at all, you mean! I see it in your face!" cried the Duke so that Claude could not answer him. "But why not?" he added vehemently. "Where does the harm come in? It's only a blooming nosegay. What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," was the reply, "only it might embarrass Olivia."

"Make her uncomfortable?"
“Well, yes; it would be rather marked, you know. A bouquet like that is only fit for a bride.”

“I don’t see it,” said Jack, much crestfallen; “still, if that’s so, it’s just as well to know it. There was no harm meant. I wasn’t thinking of any rot of that kind. However, we don’t want to make her uncomfortable; that wasn’t the idea at all; so the bouquet’s off—like me. Come and let me tool you as far as the boundary fence. I want to show you how we drive four horses up the bush.”

The exhibition made Claude a little nervous; there was too much shouting at the horses for his taste, and too much cracking of the whip. Jack could crack a whip better than any man in his own stables. But he accepted Claude’s criticism with his usual docility, and dropped him at the gates with his unfailing nod of pure good-humour.

There he sat on the box, in loose rough tweeds of a decent cut, and with the early August sun striking under the brim of a perfectly respectable straw hat, but adding little to the broad light of his own honest, beaming
countenance. He waved his whip, and Claude his hand. Then the whip cracked—but only once—and the poet strolled back to his verses, steeped in thought. He had done his best. His soul divined vaguely what the result might mean to him. But his actual thoughts were characteristically permissible; he was merely wondering what Lady Caroline and Olivia Sellwood would say now.