CHAPTER VIII.

THE OLD ADAM.

OLIVIA said least. Her mother took Claude by the hand, and thanked him with real tears in her eyes, for after all she was an Irishwoman, who could be as emotional as possible when she chose. As for Mr. Sellwood, he expressed himself as delightfully disappointed in the peer of whom he had heard so much. Jack struck him as being an excellent fellow, although not a golfer, which was a pity, and even apparently disinclined to take up the game—which might signify some recondite flaw in his character. So said the Home Secretary. But Olivia merely asked who had put all those roses in her room; and when Claude told her, she simply nodded and took hardly any notice of the Duke that night; yet she wore a handful of his flowers at her shapely waist. And she did thank him, in a way.

It was not the sweetest way in the world, as all her ways had been, these many weeks, in
Jack's imagination. He was grieved and disappointed, but still more was he ashamed. He had taken a liberty. He had alienated his friend. Thus he blamed himself, with bitter, wordless thoughts, and would then fall back upon his disappointment. His feelings were a little mixed. One moment she was not all that he had thought her; the next, she was more than all. She was more beautiful. Often he had tried to recall her face, and tried in vain, having seen her but once before, and then only for a few minutes. Now he perceived that his first impression, blurred and yet dear to him as it had been, had done but meagre justice to Olivia. He had forgotten the delicate dark eyebrows, so much darker than the hair. The girl's radiant colouring had also escaped him. It was like the first faint flush of an Australian dawn. Yet he had missed it in June, just as he had missed the liquid hazel of her eyes; their absolute honesty was what he remembered best; and, by a curious irony, that frank, fine look was the very one which she denied him now.

And so it was from the Friday evening, when the Sellwoods arrived, to the Monday morning
when duty recalled the Home Secretary to St. Stephen's. He obeyed the call in no statesman-like frame of mind. He had spent the Sabbath in open sin upon the new-made links, and had been fitly punished by his own execrable play. The athletic agent had made an example of him; he felt that he might just as well have been in church (or rather in the private chapel attached to the Towers), reading the lessons for his son-in-law, Francis Freke; and in the Saturday's "foursome," with the reverend gentleman on his side, the Cabinet Minister had done little better. So he had departed very sorely against the grain, his white hairs bristling with discontent, a broken "driver" hidden away in the depths of his portmanteau. And Olivia, seeing the last of him from amid the tall columns of the portico, felt heavy-hearted, because her father was also her friend.

Jack watched her at a distance. It did not occur to him that the girl's mother was already pitching him at the girl's head, daily and almost hourly, until she was weary of the very sound of his name. And though he felt he must have overstepped some mark in the matter of the
flowers, he little dreamt how Miss Sellwood's maid had looked when she saw them, or what disgraceful satisfaction Lady Caroline had exhibited before her daughter on that occasion. He only knew that her Ladyship was treating him with a rather oppressive kindness, and that he would much sooner have had half-a-dozen words from Olivia, such as the first she had ever spoken to him.

And now the girl was unhappy; it was plain enough, even to his untutored eye; and he stepped forward with the determination of improving her spirits, without thinking of his own, which were not a little flat.

"You must find it dull up the country, Miss Sellwood, after London," began Jack, not perhaps in his most natural manner. "I—I wish to goodness you'd tell us of anything we could do to amuse you!"

"You are very good," replied Olivia, "but I don't require to be amused like a child. Thanks all the same. As to finding the country dull, I never appreciate it so much as after a season in town."

She was not looking at the Duke, but beyond
him into the hall. And encountering no other eyes there, her own grew softer, as did her tone, even as she spoke.

"You know this old place off by heart, Miss Sellwood, I expect?" pursued Jack, who had taken off his straw hat in her presence, being in doubt as to whether the portico ranked indoors or out.

"Oh, well, I have stayed here pretty often, you know," said Olivia. "What do you think of the place?"

"I can't hardly say. I've never seen anything else like it. It's far too good, though, for a chap like me; it's all so grand."

"I have sometimes felt it a little too grand," the girl ventured to observe.

"So have I!" cried Jack. "You can't think how glad I am to hear you say that. It's my own feeling right down to the ground!"

"I don't mean to be rude," continued Olivia confidentially, seeing that they were still unobserved, "but I have often felt that I wouldn't care to live here altogether."

"No?" said the Duke, in a new tone; he felt vaguely dashed, but his manner was rather one of apologetic sympathy.
"No," she repeated; "shall you like it?"

"Can't say. I haven't weakened on it yet, though it is too fine and large for a fellow. Shall I tell you what I've done? I've fixed up a little place for myself outside, where I can go whenever I get full up of the homestead here. I wonder—if it isn't too much to ask—whether you would let me show you the little spot I mean?"

"Where is it?"

"In the pines yonder, on the far side o' the tank."

"The tank!"

"We call 'em tanks in Australia. I meant the lake. I could row you across, Miss Sellwood, in a minute, if only you'd let me!" And he met her doubtful look with one of frank, simple-hearted, irresistible entreaty.

"Come on!" said Olivia, suddenly; and as she went, she never looked behind; for she seemed to feel her mother's eyes upon her from an upper window, and the hot shame of their certain approval made her tingle from head to foot. So she trod the close, fine, sunlit grass as
far as possible from her companion's side. And he, falling back a little, was enabled to watch her all the way.

Olivia was very ordinarily attired. She wore a crisp white blouse speckled with tiny scarlet spots, and a plain skirt of navy blue, just short enough to give free play to the small brown shoes whose high heels the Duke had admired in the portico. Two scarlet bands, a narrow and a broad, encircled her straw hat and her waist, with much the same circumference: and yet this exceedingly average costume struck Jack as the most delicious thing imaginable of its kind. He corrected another impression before they reached the lake. Olivia was taller than he had thought; she was at least five-feet-six; and she carried her slim, trim figure in a fine upstanding fashion that took some of the roundness out of his own shoulders as he noted it this August morning.

"It's the back-block bend," he remarked elliptically, in the boat.

His way with the oars was inelegant enough, without a pretence at feathering; but it was quite effectual; and Olivia, in the stern-sheets, had
her back still presented to the Argus-eyes of the Towers. She answered him with a puzzled look, as well she might, for he had done no more than think aloud.

"What is that?" she said. "And what are the back-blocks; and what do you mean?" for her puzzled look had lifted on a smile.

"I was thinking of my round shoulders. You get them through being all your time in the saddle, up in the back-blocks. All the country in Riverina—that is, all the fenced country—is split up into ten-mile blocks. And the back-blocks are the farthest from the rivers and from civilisation. So that's why they call it the back-block bend; it came into my head through seeing you. I never saw anybody hold themselves so well, Miss Sellwood—if it isn't too like my cheek to say so!"

The keel grounded as he spoke, and Olivia, as he handed her out, saw the undulating battlements and toppling turrets of the olden pile upside-down in the tremulous mirror of the lake. A moment later the pine-trees had closed around her; and, sure enough, in a distant window, Lady Caroline Sellwood lowered her
opera-glasses with a sigh of exceeding great contentment.

“So you haven’t forgotten your old life yet,” said the girl, as they stepped out briskly across the shortening shadows of the pines. “I wish you would tell me something about it! I have heard it said that you lived in ever such a little hut, away by yourself in the wilderness.”

“I did so; and in a clump of pines the dead spit of these here,” said Jack, with a relish. “When I saw these pines you can’t think how glad I was! They were like old friends to me; they made me feel at home. You see, Miss Sellwood, that old life is the only one I ever knew, bar this; often enough it seems the realest of the two. Most nights I dream I’m out there again; last night, for instance, we were lamb-marking. A nasty job, that; I was covered with blood from head to heels, and I was just counting the poor little beggars’ tails, when one of the dead tails wriggled in my hand, and blowed if it wasn’t Livingstone’s! No, there’s no forgetting the old life; I was at it too long; it’s this one that’s most like a dream.”
"And the hut," said Olivia, with a rather wry face; "what sort of a place was that?"

"I'll show you," replied the Duke, in what struck the other as a superfluously confidential tone. "It was a little bit of a place, all one room, with a galvanised iron roof and mother-earth for floor. It was built with the very pines that had been felled to make a clearing for the hut; so many uprights, and horizontal slabs in between. A great square hearth and chimney were built out at one end, like the far end of a church; and over my bunk I'd got a lot of pictures from the Australasian Sketcher just stuck up anyhow; and if you weren't looking, you knocked your head against the ration-bags that hung from the cross-beams. You slept inside, but you kept your bucket and basin on a bench——"

"Good heavens!" cried Olivia. And she stood rooted to the ground before a clearing and a hut which exactly tallied with the Duke's description. The hut was indeed too new, the maker's stamp catching the eye on the galvanised roofing; and, in the clearing, the pine-stumps were still white from the axe; but the essentials
were the same, even to the tin basin on the bench outside the door, with a bucket of water underneath. As for the wooden chimney, Olivia had never seen such a thing in her life; yet real smoke was leaking out of it into the pale blue sky.

"Is this a joke or a trick?" asked the girl, looking suspiciously on Jack.

"Neither; it's meant for the dead image of my old hut up the bush; and it's the little place I've fixed up for myself, here on the run, that I wanted to show you."

"You've had it built during these last few weeks?"

"Under my own eye; and bits of it with my own hand. Old Claude thought it sheer cussedness, I know; perhaps you will, too; but come in, and have a look for yourself."

And unlocking the padlock that secured it, he opened the door and stood aside for the young girl to enter. Olivia did so with alacrity; her first amazement had given way to undiluted interest; and the Duke followed her, straw hat in hand. There was a tantalising insufficiency of light within. Two small windows
there were, but both had been filled with opaque folds of sackcloth in lieu of glass; yet the Duke pointed to them, as might his ancestors to the stained-glass lights in chapel and library, with peculiar pride; and, indeed, his strange delight in the hut, who cared so little for the Towers close at hand, made Olivia marvel when she came to think about it. Meanwhile she found everything as she had heard it described in the Australian hut, with one exception: there were no ration-bags to knock one's head against, because nobody made meals here. Also the pictures over the bunk were from the Illustrated London News, not from the Sketcher, which Jack had been unable to obtain in England; and they were somewhat unconvincingly clean and well-arranged. But the bunk itself was all that it might have been in the real bush; for it was covered over with Jack's own old blanket, whereon lay a purring, yellow ball, like a shabby sand-bank in a sea of faded blue.

"So this is Livingstone!" exclaimed the girl, stooping to scratch that celebrity's head.

"Yes; and there's old Tom and Black Maria in front of the fire. I lock them all three up
during the day, for it isn’t so like the bush in some ways as it is in others. They might get stolen any day, with so many people about; that’s the worst of the old country; there was no other camp within five miles of me, on Carara.”

“It must have been dreadfully lonely!”

“You get used to it. And then every few months you would tramp into the homestead and—and speak to the boss,” said Jack, changing his mind and his sentence as he remembered how he had once shocked Claude Lafont.

Olivia took notice of the cats, at which Jack stood by beaming. The kitten she had brought down from town in a basket. It lived in Olivia’s room, but she now suggested restoring it to its own people. Jack, however, reminded her that it was hers, in such a tender voice; and proceeded to refer to her kindness at their first meeting, in so embarrassing a fashion; that the girl, seeking a change of subject, found one in the long, low bunk.

“I see,” said she, “that you come here for your afternoon siesta.”
"I come here for my night's sleep," he replied.

"Never!"

"Every night in life. You seem surprised. I did ask old Claude not to mention it—and—oh, well, it's no use keeping the thing a secret, after all. It suits me best—the open country and the solitude. It's what I'm accustomed to. The wind in the pines all around, I wake up and hear it every night, just like I did in the old hut. It's almost the same thing as going back to the bush to sleep; there's not two penn'orth of difference."

"You'd like to go back altogether," said the girl, affirming it as a fact; and yet her sweet eyes, gravely unsatisfied, seemed to peer through his into his soul.

"I don't say that, Miss Sellwood," he protested. "Of course it's a great thing for me to have come in for all this fortune and power—and it'll be a greater thing still once I can believe it's true! That's the trouble. The whole show's so like a dream. And that's where this little hut helps me; it's real, anyway; I can sight it. As for all the rest, it's
too many measles for me—as yet; what's more, if I was to wake up this minute on Carara I shouldn't so very much mind."

"I wonder," said Olivia, with her fine eyes looking through him still. "I just wonder!" And her tone set him wondering too.

"Of course," he faltered, "I should be mighty sorry to wake up and find I'd only dreamt you!"

"Of course," she returned, with a laughing bow; but there had been an instant's pause; and she was studying the picture gallery over the bunk when she continued, "I see you've been long enough in England to acquire the art of making pretty speeches. And I must tell you at once that they never amuse me. At least," she added more kindly, again facing him, "not when they come from a person as a rule so candid as yourself."

"But you mistake me; I was perfectly candid," protested poor Jack.

"It won't do," said the girl. "And it's time we went."

Olivia felt that she had made excellent friends with the Duke; that the more she saw
of him, the better she would probably like
him; and that she could possibly be of use
to him, in little ways, if he would be sensible,
and make no more than a friend of her. She
was not so sure of him, however, as she
could have wished; and she was anxious to
leave well alone. It was thus the worst of
luck that at this last moment she should
perceive the suggestively white bouquet upon
the high deal chimney-piece.

"You've been to a wedding," she cried,
"and I've never heard a word about it!
Whose was the wedding? Some of the
tenantry, of course, or the bride would hardly
have presented you with her bouquet!"

And she reached it down, and widened her
pretty nostrils over the fading flowers; but they
smelt of death; and their waxen whiteness
had here and there the tarnish of a half-eaten
apple.

"There was no bride," said Jack, "and
no wedding."

"Then why this bride's bouquet? No! I
beg your pardon; it isn't a fair question."

"It is—perfectly. I had it made for a
young lady. The head-gardener made it, but I told him first what I wanted. There was no word of a wedding; I only thought a nosegay would be the right sort of thing to give a young lady, to show her she was mighty welcome; and I thought white was a nice clean sort of colour. But it turned out I was wrong; she wouldn’t have liked it; it would only have made her uncomfortable; so, when I found out that, I just let it rest.”

“I see,” said Olivia, seeing only too clearly. “Still, I’m not sure you were right: if I had been the girl——”

“Yes?”

The quick word altered the speech it had also interrupted.

“I should have thought it exceedingly kind of you,” said Olivia, after a moment’s reflection. She replaced the flowers on the chimney-board, and then led the way out among the pines.

“I’m sorry you were in such a hurry,” he said, overtaking her when he had locked up the hut. “I might have made you some billy-tea. The billy’s the can you make it in up the bush. I had such a work to get one
over here! I keep some tea in the hut, and billy-tea's not like any other kind; I call it better; but you must come again and sample it for yourself."

"We'll see," said Olivia, smilingly; but with that she lost her tongue; and together they crossed the lake in mutually low spirits. It was as though the delicate spell of simple friendship had been snapped as soon as spun between them, and the friends were friends no more.

On the lawn, however, in a hammock under an elm, they found a young man smoking. It was Mr. Edmund Stubbs, who had arrived, with his friend the Impressionist, on the Saturday afternoon. He was smoking a pipe; but the ground beneath him was defiled with the ends of many cigarettes; and close at hand a deck-chair stood empty.

"I smell the blood of Mr. Llewellyn," said Olivia, coming up with the glooming Duke "He smokes far too many cigarettes!"

"He has gone for more," said the man in the hammock.

"I wonder you don't interfere, Mr. Stubbs; it must be so bad for him."
“On the contrary, Miss Sellwood, it is the best thing in the world for him. A man must smoke something. And an artist must smoke cigarettes. You can tell what he does smoke, however, from his work. Pipe-work is inevitably coarse, banal, obvious, and only fit to hang in the front parlours of Brixton and Upper Tooting. Cigar-work is little better; but that of the cigarette is delicate, suggestive, fantastic if you will, but always artistic. Ivor Llewellyn’s is typical cigarette-work.”

“How very interesting,” said Olivia.

“My colonial!” muttered the Duke.

At the same time they caught each other’s eyes, turned away with one consent, nor made a sound between them until they were out of earshot of the hammock. And then they only laughed; yet the spell that had been broken was even thus made whole.