CHAPTER IX.

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER.

It is comparatively easy to read a character from a face. This is always a scientific possibility. To fit the face to a given character is obviously the reverse. And those who knew the worst of Lady Caroline Sellwood, before making her acquaintance, received, on that occasion, something like a shock. They had nourished visions of a tall and stately figure with a hook-nose and an exquisitely supercilious smile; whereas her Ladyship was decidedly short, and extremely stout, with as plebeian a snub-nose and as broad a grin as any in her own back-kitchen. Instead of the traditionally frigid leader of society, she was a warm-hearted woman where her own interests were not concerned; where they were, she was just what expedience made her, and her heart then took its temperature from her head, like the excellent servant it had always been. A case very much in point is that of her relations
with Claude Lafont, whom, however, Lady Caroline had now her own reasons for fearing no more. As for the Duke of St. Osmund's, her heart had been a perfect oven to him from the first.

Nor did she make any pretence about the matter—it was this that so repelled Olivia. But the very falsity of the woman was frank to the verge of a virtue; and the honest dishonesty of her front hair (which was of the same shade as Olivia's, only much more elaborately curled) was as bluntly emblematic as a pirate's flag. Lady Caroline Sellwood was honestly dishonest to the last ounce of her two hundredweight of avoirdupois.

This was the kind of thing she thought nothing of doing. She had been engaged for months upon an egregious smoking-cap for Claude Lafont. That is to say she had from time to time put in a few golden stitches, in front of Claude, which her maid had been obliged to pick out and put in again behind the scenes. Claude, at any rate, had always understood that the cap was for him—until one evening here in the conservatory, when he
saw Lady Caroline coolly trying it on the Duke.

"It never did fit you, Claude," she explained serenely. "It was always too small, and I must make you another. Only see how it fits the dear Duke!"

The dear Duke was made the recipient of many another mark of unblushing favour. He could do no wrong. His every solecism of act or word, and they still cropped up at times, was simply "sweet" in the eyes of Lady Caroline Sellwood, and his name was seldom on her lips without that epithet.

Moreover, she would speak her mind to him on every conceivable topic, and this with a freedom often embarrassing for Jack; as, for example, on the first Sunday after church.

"I simply don't know how Francis dared!" Lady Caroline exclaimed, as she took Jack's arm on the sunlit terrace. "Twenty-one minutes by my watch—and such drivel! It didn't seem so to you? Ah, you're so sweet! But twenty-one minutes was an outrage, and I shall tell the little idiot exactly what I think of him."

"I rather like him," said Jack, who put it
thus mildly out of pure politeness to his companion; "and I rather liked what he said."

"Oh, he's no worse than the rest of them," rejoined Lady Caroline. "Of course I swear by the sweet Established Church, but the parsons personally, with very few exceptions, I never could endure. Still, it's useful to have one in the family; he does everything for us. He christens the grandchildren, and he'll bury the lot of us if he's spared, to say nothing of marrying poor Olivia when her time comes. Ah well, let's hope that won't be yet! She is my ewe lamb. And all men are not such dear sweet fellows as you!"

This sort of speech he found unanswerable; and although treated by her Ladyship with unflagging consideration, amounting almost to devotion, Jack was never at his ease in such interviews.

One of these took place in the hut. Lady Caroline insisted on seeing it, accompanied by Olivia. Of course the whole idea charmed her to ecstasies; it was so original; it showed such a simple heart; and the hut itself was as "sweet" as everything else connected with the
Duke. So was the pannikin of tea which Jack was entreated to brew for her in the "billy"; indeed, this was too sweet for Lady Caroline, who emptied most of hers upon the earth behind her camp-stool—an act which Jack pretended not to detect, and did not in the least resent. On the contrary, he put a characteristic construction upon the incident, which he attributed exclusively to Lady Caroline's delicate reluctance to hurt his feelings by expressing her real opinion of the tea; for though personally oppressed by her persistent kindness, he was much too unsophisticated, and had perhaps too good a heart of his own, ever to suspect an underlying motive.

Towards the end of that week, in fact on the Friday afternoon, they were all taking tea on the terrace; or rather all but the two talented young men, who were understood never to touch it, and who, indeed, were somewhat out of their element at the Towers, except late at night, when the ladies had gone to bed. "I can't think why you asked them down," said Lady Caroline to Claude. "I didn't," was the reply; "it was you, Jack." "Of course it was me,"
cried the astonished Jack, "and why not? Didn't they use to go to your rooms, old man, and to your house, Lady Caroline?" "Ah," said her Ladyship, with her indulgent smile, "but that was rather a different thing—you dear kind fellow!" All this, however, was not on the Friday afternoon, when Lady Caroline was absorbed in very different thoughts. They were not of the conversation, although she put in her word here and there; the subject, that of the Nottingham murder, being one of peculiar interest. The horrible case in question, which had filled the papers all that week, had ended the previous day in an inevitable conviction. And even Claude was moved to the expression of a strong opinion as he put down the *Times*.

"I must say that I agree with the judge," he remarked with a shudder. "'Unparalleled barbarity' is the only word for it! What on earth, though, was there to become 'almost inaudible with emotion' about, in passing sentence? If I could see any man hanged with equanimity, or indeed at all, I confess it would be this loathly wretch."

"Claude," said Lady Caroline, "I'm ashamed
of you. He is an innocent man. He shall not die."

"Who's to prevent it?" asked Jack.

"I am," replied Lady Caroline, calmly.

"There'll probably be a petition, you see," exclaimed Claude. "Then the Home Secretary decides."

"And I decide the Home Secretary," said Lady Caroline Sellwood.

It was grossly untrue, and Olivia shook her head in answer to the Duke's astounded stare, but her mother's eyes were again fixed thoughtfully on lawn and lake. The short dry grass was overrun with wild thyme, innumerable butterflies played close to it, as spray, and the air hummed with bees likewise in love with the aroma, whose fragrance reached even to the terrace. But Lady Caroline noted none of these things, nor yet the shadows of spire and turret encroaching on the lawn—nor yet the sunlight strong as ever on the lake beyond. She was already pondering on the best way of bringing a certain matter to a head. This quiet country life, with so tiny a house-party, and with one
day so like another was excellent so far as it went, but the chances were that it would not go the whole way. It lacked excitement and incentive. It was the kind of life in which an attachment might too easily stagnate in mere foolish friendship. It needed an event; a something to prepare for, to look forward to; a something to tighten the nerves and slacken the tongue; and yet nothing that should give the Duke an opportunity of appearing at a public disadvantage.

So this was the difficulty. It disqualified the dance, the dinner-party, even the entertaining of the county from 3.30 to 6.30 in the grounds. But Lady Caroline overcame it, as she overcame most difficulties, by the patient application of her ingenious mind. And her outward scheme was presently unfolded in the fewest and apparently the most spontaneous words.

"He is not guilty, and he shall not die," she suddenly observed, as though the Nottingham murder had all this time monopolised her thoughts. "But let us speak of something else; I had, indeed, a very different matter upon my mind, until the papers came and
banished everything with this ghastly business. The fact is, dear Duke, that you should really do something to entertain your tenantry, and possibly a few neighbours also, before they begin to talk. They will expect it sooner or later, and in these things it is always better to take time by the forelock. Mind, I don't mean an elaborate matter at all—except from their point of view. I would just give them the run of the place for the afternoon, and feed the multitude later on. Francis, don't look shocked! I hope you'll be there to ask a blessing. Then, Duke, you could have a band on the lawn, and fireworks, and indeed anything you like. It's always good policy to do the civil to one's tenantry, though no doubt a bore; but you needn't shake hands with them, you know, and you could leaven the lower orders with a few parsons and their wives from the surrounding rectories. It's only a suggestion, of course, and that from one who has really no right to put in her oar at all; still I know you won't misunderstand it—coming from me.

He did not; his face had long been alight
and aglow with the red-heat of his enthusiasm; and now his words leapt forth like flames.

"The very ticket!" he cried, starting to his feet. "A general muster of all sorts, and we'll do 'em real well. Fizz and fireworks! A dance on the lawn! And I'll make 'em a speech to wind up with!"

"That would be beautiful," said Lady Caroline with an inward shudder. "What a dear fellow you are, to be sure, to take up my poor little suggestion like this!"

"Take it up," cried Jack, "I should think I would take it up! It'll be the best sport out. Lady Caroline, you're one in two or three! I'm truly thankful for the tip. Here's my hand on it!"

His hand was pressed without delay.

"It really is an excellent suggestion," said Claude Lafont, in his deliberate way, after mature consideration. "It only remains to settle the date."

"And the brand of fizz, old man, and the sort of fireworks! I'll leave all that to you. And the date, too; any day will do me; the sooner the better."
"Well," said Lady Caroline, as though it had only just struck her, "Olivia's birthday is the twentieth—"

"Mamma!" cried that young lady, with real indignation.

"And it's her twenty-first birthday," pursued the other, "and she is my ewe lamb. I must confess I should like to honour that occasion—"

"Same here! By all manner o' means!" broke in the Duke. "Now, Miss Sellwood, it's no use your saying one word; this thing's a fixture for the twentieth as ever is."

The girl was furious. The inevitable, nay, the intentional linking of her name with that of the Duke of St. Osmund's, entailed by the arrangement thus mooted and made, galled her pride to the quick. And yet it was but one more twang of the catapult that was daily and almost hourly throwing her at his head; neither was it his fault any more than hers; so she made shift to thank him, as kindly as she could at the moment, for the compliment he was so ready to pay her—at her mother's suggestion.

"You could hardly get out of it, however.
after what was said,” she added, not perhaps inexcusably in the circumstances.

“No more can you,” retorted the Duke. “And here comes the very man we must all consult,” he added, as the agent appeared, a taking figure in his wrinkled riding breeches, and with his spurs trailing on the dead-smooth flags.

The agent handed Jack a soiled note, and then sat down to talk to the ladies. This he did at all times excellently, having assurance and a certain well-bred familiarity of manner, which, as the saying is, went down. In this respect he was a contrast to all the other men present. He inquired when the Home Secretary would be back and ready for his revenge on the links. And he heard of the plans for the twentieth with interest and a somewhat superfluous approval. Meanwhile the Duke had read his note more than once, and now he looked up.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, displaying the crumpled envelope, which had also a hole through the middle.

“In rather a rum place,” replied the agent. “It was nailed to a tree just outside the north gates.”
"Well, see here," said Jack, who stood facing the party, with his back to the stone bulwark of the terrace, and a hard look on his face; "that's just the sort of place where I should have expected you to find it, for it's an anonymous letter that some fellows might keep to themselves—but not me! I'm for getting to the bottom of things, whether they're nice or whether they're nasty. Listen to this: 'To the Duke of St. Osmund's'—he prints 'Duke' in big letters, as much as to say I'm not one. 'A word in your Grace's ear'—he prints that the same. 'They say,' he says, 'that you hail from Australia, and I say you're not the first claimant to titles and estates that has sprung from there. Take a friendly tip and put on as few frills as possible till you're quite sure you are not going to be bowled out for a second Tichborne. A well-wisher.' Now what does it all mean? Is it simple cheek, or isn't it? I recollect all about Tichborne. I recollect seeing him in Wagga when I was a lad, and we took a great interest in his case up the bush; but why am I like him? Where does the likeness come in? I've heard fat men called second
Tichbornes, but I don't turn twelve stone. Then what can he mean? Does he mean I'm not a Duke? I know I'm not fit to be one; but that's another matter; and if it comes to that, I never claimed to be one either; it was Claude here who yarded me up into this pen! Then what's it all about? Can any lady or gentleman help me? I'll pass the letter round, and I'll be mightily obliged if they can!"

They could: it was pure insolence not to be taken seriously for a single moment. So they all said with one consent; and Jack was further advised to steel himself forthwith against anonymous letters, of which persons in his station received hundreds every year. The agent added that he believed he knew who had written this one; at least he had his suspicions.

In a word, the affair was treated by all in the very common-sense light of a mere idle insult; any serious sympathy that was evinced being due entirely to the fact that Jack himself seemed to take it rather to heart. Lady Caroline Sellwood dismissed the matter
with the fewest words of all; nevertheless, Jack detected her in a curious, penetrating, speculative scrutiny of himself, which he could not fathom at the time; and her Ladyship had a word to say to Claude Lafont after obtaining his arm as far as the house.

"That sort of thing is never pleasant," she observed confidentially, "and I can't help wishing the dear fellow had kept his letter to himself. It gives one such disagreeable ideas! I am the last person to be influenced by such pieces of impudence, as a general rule; still I could not help thinking what a very awkward thing it would be if your Mr. Cripps had made a big mistake after all! Not awkward from every point of view, dear Claude"—and here she pressed his arm—"but—but of course he had every substantial proof?"

"Of course," said Claude. "I looked into it, as a matter of form, on Cripps's return; though his word was really quite sufficient. Well, he had copies of the certificate of Jack's birth, and of that of my uncle's marriage, besides proof positive that Jack was Jack. And that was good enough for me."
"And for me too," said Lady Caroline, dropping his arm. "He is a dear fellow; I hardly know which is greater, my regard for him or my sympathy with you!" And her Ladyship marched upstairs.

Meantime the agent had led Jack aside on the terrace.

"I know who sent that letter," said he. "I had my suspicions all along, and I recognised the disguised hand in a moment. It was Matthew Hunt."

"Well?" said Jack.

"Well, it was meant merely as an annoyance: a petty revenge for the handsome thrashing you gave the fellow six weeks ago—I wish I'd seen it! But that's not the point. The point is that I think I could bring it home to the brute; and I want your Grace to let me try."

"I can't. What's the good? Leave bad alone; we should only make it worse."

"Then mayn't I raise the rent of the Lower Farm?"

"No; not yet, at any rate. I mean to give the fellow a chance."
"And an invitation for the twentieth too?"
"Certainly; he's a tenant, or his father is; we can't possibly leave them out."
"Very well; your Grace knows best."
And the agent went his way.