

MISS TIMMINS AND LORD SCREDINGTON

By
Edgar Jepson

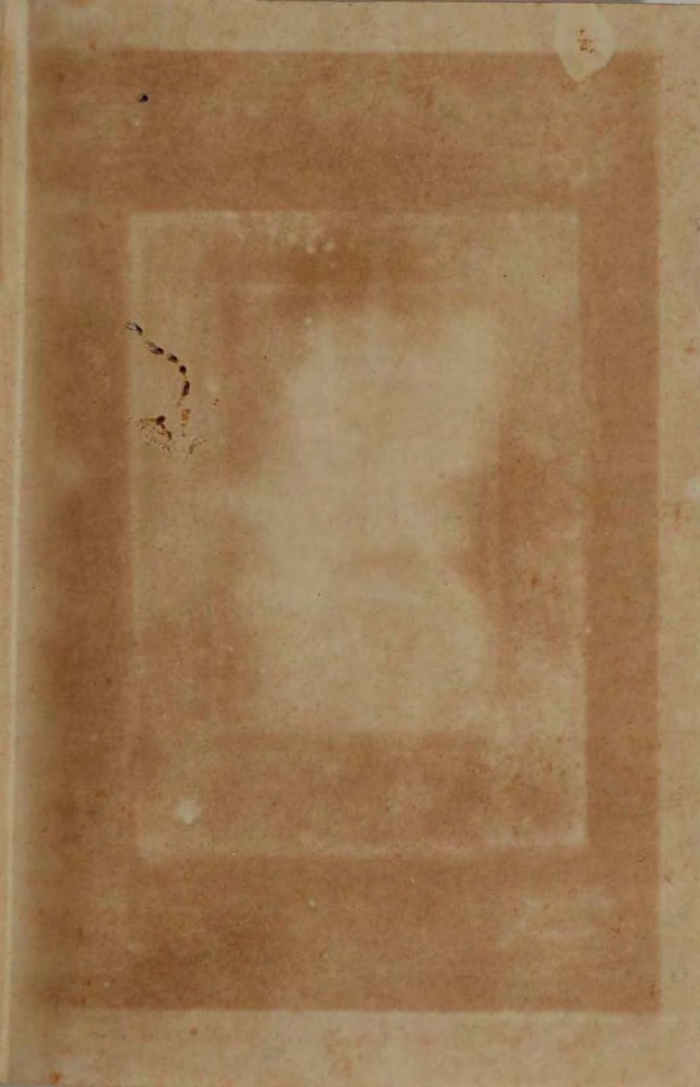


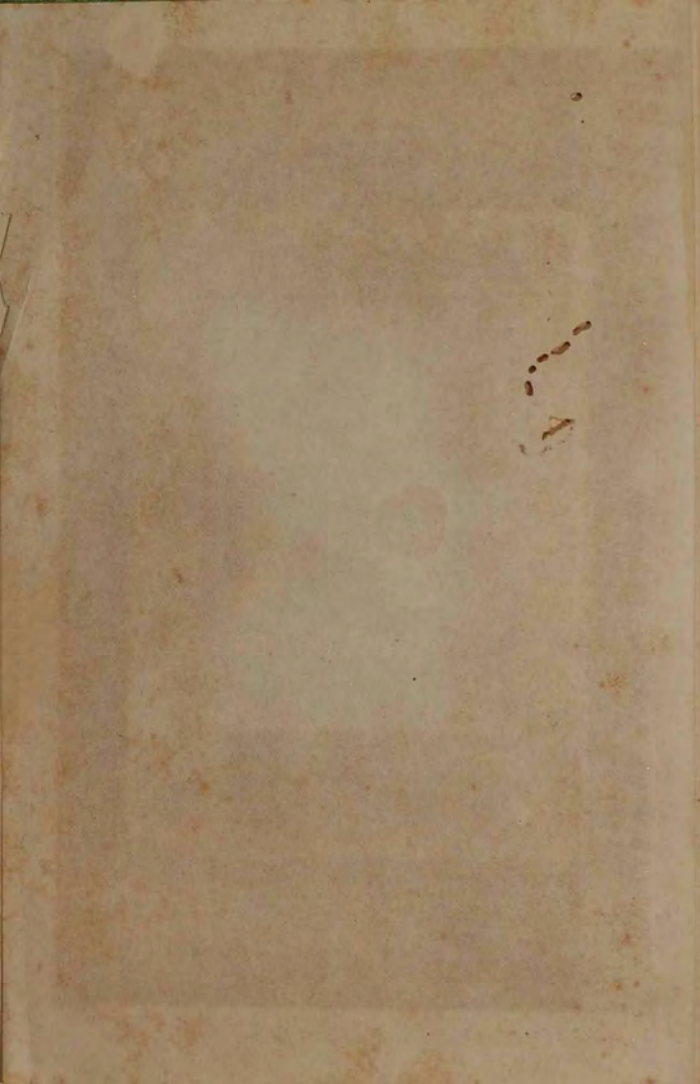
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MISS TIMMINS AND
LORD SCREDINGTON

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Miss Timmins runs an Oriental curio shop, and her adventures with strange and beautiful pieces of jade and lapis-lazuli and chalcedony, carved by the artists of the East, and the strange and sometimes dangerous customers they bring her, are always amusing and sometimes thrilling. In them Lord Scredington plays a considerable part, always an amusing part, often a helping part, sometimes a violent part. With every intention of being her evil genius, he generally contrives to be her good genius, and in the end her not very deeply-seated repugnance is worn thin, forcibly.

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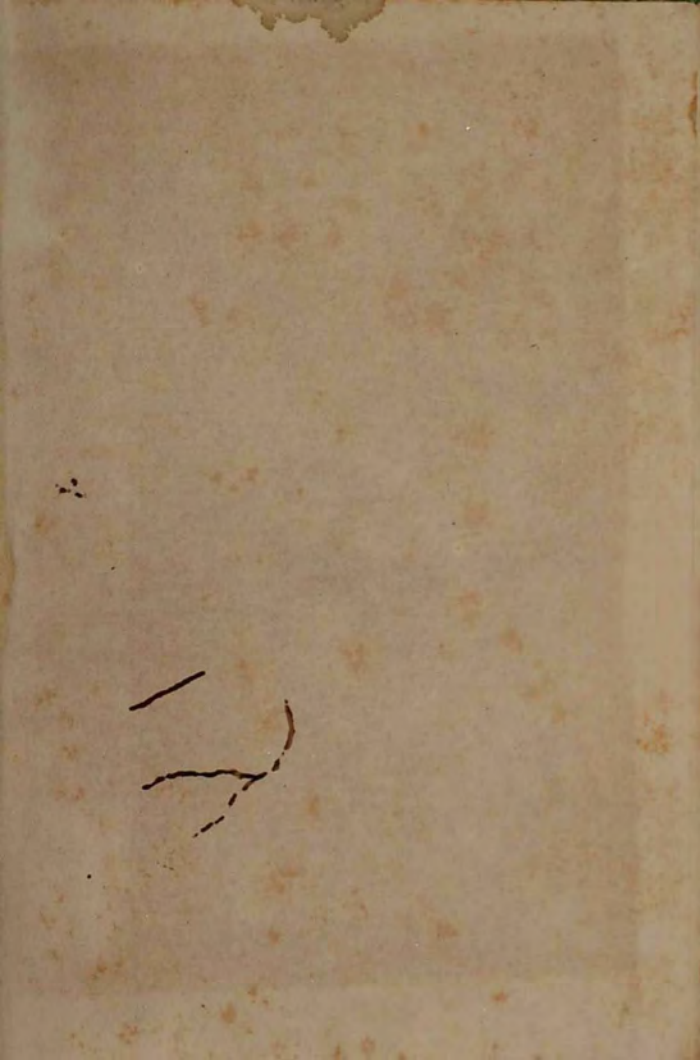
HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
YORK STREET ST. JAMES'S S.W.1



Second printing

Printed in Great Britain by THE GARDEN CITY PRESS LTD., LETCHWORTH

To
M. D. D.



CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE LAPIS LAZULI CLOAK-HOOK - -	9
II. A CUP AND SAUCER - - - -	22
III. LORD SCREDINGTON GETS HIS OWN WAY -	35
IV. THE JADE SPIRIT GONG - - - -	51
V. THE CHINESE CUSTOMER - - - -	65
VI. THE VAMPIRE - - - - -	77
VII. THE RESCUE - - - - -	92
VIII. A CHANGE OF SWORDS - - - -	107
IX. MISS TIMMINS AGAIN DANCES AT THIBAULT'S	119
X. A MISTAKE REPAIRED - - - -	132
XI. THE MYSTIC FAN - - - - -	143
XII. MISS TIMMINS MEETS THE INITIATES -	159
XIII. MISS TIMMINS LOSES THE MYSTIC FAN -	177
XIV. THE EIGHT FROGS - - - - -	196
XV. MISS TIMMINS SELLS THE FROGS - -	208

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVI. THE GREATEST LOVE CHARM IN THE WORLD	230
XVII. LADY KELLINGWORTH HIRES THE CHARM -	240
XVIII. BLACK MAGIC - - - - -	251
XIX. THE CATASTROPHE - - - - -	260
XX. MISS TIMMINS CHANGES HER WAY OF LIFE -	272
XXI. THE CHALCEDONY HORSE - - - - -	285
XXII. DAWN - - - - -	302

MISS TIMMINS AND LORD SCREDINGTON

CHAPTER I

THE LAPIS LAZULI CLOAK-HOOK

LITTLE Miss Timmins came out of Farringdon's Auction Rooms in a bad temper. There was no real reason why she should be called little Miss Timmins, for she was of middle height, with an admirable figure. But her calling of dealer in works of art brought her almost wholly into contact with other dealers, who were male and much older, and collectors, who were also male and as a rule much older, and they always spoke of her as little Miss Timmins.

She was in that bad temper because she had gone to the sale to buy two or three lots of netsuke, those little Japanese toggles in the form of men, animals and plants, so admirably carved in ivory and wood that Jules de Goncourt declared that there were Michael Angelos among the makers of them. She had a customer for netsuke to whom she fed ten or a dozen at a time, judiciously, not oftener than once

10 MISS TIMMINS AND LORD SCREDINGTON

every six weeks, so that his appetite for them should have time to grow keen again and his purse fill up again and he would pay better prices.

But she had come away from the sale without any netsuke. The collectors had been there in force; prices had soared to a height which made it impossible to make a profit. Miss Timmins hated collectors at sales. She often said so. They put up the prices of objects of art beyond the purses of honest dealers like herself. She had the strongest feeling that collectors had no right to go to sales. The place for them to go when they wanted to buy objects of art was the shop of an honest dealer.

There was a veritable scowl on Miss Timmins's pretty face.

She was half way down Conduit Street when that cheerful and wicked young nobleman, Lord Scredington, overtook her. She had always seen him cheerful, and she knew that he was wicked. She had once taken a jade plaque from the sceptre of a prince to his flat in Mount Street—he collected Chinese hard stone—and discovered, with horror and affright, that he had learnt much from the cave man. Therefore, she disliked him very much. She told herself that she disliked him very much often, and refused to admit to herself that, in spite of that dislike, he had a certain attraction for her, that, whenever she saw him suddenly, a queer little tremor of terror, not wholly disagreeable, ran through her. When he overtook her in Conduit Street that tremor ran through her again.

He was tall and slim and he looked down upon her

from rather a height as he said in a compassionate tone: "I am afraid you didn't have any luck to-day, Baby. I didn't see you get a single lot."

Miss Timmins had the greatest dislike to being called Baby by him. She was a very dignified young person. It was such awful cheek, but he always tried to tease her, whenever he came to her father's shop, whenever he met her at a sale. Sometimes she thought it a pity that he was a customer; though you may tell a customer that he is a cad and a black-guard once, you cannot go on quarrelling with your bread and butter. Not that Lord Scredington would quarrel; he was a very cheerful young man.

Therefore she kept her tone quite civil, though haughty, and said: "I didn't."

"It was hard luck," he said in really sympathetic accents. "But some days things will go like that. Well, for a wounded spirit there's nothing like a good meal. Come along and have lunch with me at Thibault's."

"No, thank you, Lord Scredington," said Miss Timmins firmly and with immense primness.

"Yes, please," said Lord Scredington cheerfully. "You must come. It is my duty to cheer you up, and I am going to do it."

"No, thank you, I had dinner before I started for Farringdon's," said Miss Timmins, with even greater firmness.

"Then you must have had it about half-past twelve, and it is half-past two. All beautiful and healthy young creatures can do with a meal every two hours," said Lord Scredington calmly. "You

needn't eat a large lunch. I will eat a large lunch, and you shall eat a small one. Come along."

He smiled down on her and she had to admit that, when he smiled with that whole-hearted friendliness, he was a most attractive person. Of course, with his clear, tanned skin, and thin, high-arched nose, those very blue eyes, and lean head, and those close-cropped little curls under the brim of his hat, he was always attractive. But when he smiled like that, he was more than attractive.

That did not prevent her from shaking her head stubbornly.

His forehead wrinkled in a frown, and he said in a kind of imploring chant: "Oh, do come, Beulah, darling! Do come, Beulah darling! I shan't enjoy my lunch a bit unless you share it with me."

Of all the cheek! Beulah darling, indeed! It was worse than Baby. Miss Timmins's kissable lips set in a firm, thin, red line.

She said in a tone of finality: "No, thank you."

"Look here, if you don't come, I'll burst into tears and sob on your shoulder. I will—here—in Conduit Street as ever is!" he said.

He spoke in a tone of iron resolution. In a sudden access of horror, Miss Timmins realised that he meant what he said, that he would certainly do it. She looked up and down the crowded street with wild eyes. What would people think?

She looked up into his face with agonised eyes; she cried in almost agonised accents: "Oh! how tiresome you are!"

On the instant his forehead grew smooth; he said

cheerfully: "That's all right then," took her gently by the arm and put her gently into the taxi that stopped to his uplifted hand.

In the taxi Miss Timmins sulked in the most dignified fashion.

And then at the entrance of Thibault's she was smitten by an access of terror. It was all so magnificent and overwhelming. But for all her discomfort, she could not help feeling pleased as she walked down the long, bright restaurant with an escort of such distinction.

At the table she resumed a cool dignity. Having extracted from her an almost sulky admission that she liked oysters, Lord Scredington ordered lunch. As he did so she looked at the people lunching round her, and thanked her stars that she was wearing her prettiest hat and frock. He finished ordering lunch and gazed at her with an air of satisfaction. And then, looking at her hat, he frowned.

Then, in a tone of irritation, he said: "I wish to goodness my womenkind went to your milliner! They never get a hat like that! Never!"

This was so unexpected that it startled Miss Timmins from her cold dignity.

With just the faintest grin, she said: "They wouldn't wear a hat like this. I made it myself; it cost four-and-a-penny."

"They'd wear it all right, if they could get it—at fifty times four-and-a-penny every time," he said confidently and scornfully.

She shook her head; but she felt somewhat appeased. Appreciation is always appreciation. She

pulled off her gloves and unfastened her coat and slipped it off.

Lord Scredington leaned forward, looking at the fastening of it, and said sharply: "What have you got there?"

"A lapis cloak-hook," said Miss Timmins. "I didn't see why, if the Mandarins used them to hook up their robes on the shoulder, I shouldn't use one to fasten my coat. And, of course, it is ever so much more swish than an ordinary button or clasp."

"But hang it all! Lapis," he said in some excitement. "I have been collecting them for years, but I have never seen one in lapis. Jade, agate, crystal, rose-quartz, amethyst, quartz, aquamarine, soap-stone, glass—but lapis never. Where did you get it?"

"At Farringdon's last month's sale."

"Last month's sale!" he almost shouted. "But I bought all the good hard stone in last month's sale. I was not there myself, but I left commissions for all the pieces I wanted and got them. And when I looked through the hard stone the day before the sale, I never saw that cloak-hook."

"I saw it," said Miss Timmins in a tone of deliberately aggravating superiority.

He frowned at it and then said: "Let's have a look at it."

She handed the coat to him. He examined the cloak-hook carefully and at length, and his eyes began to shine with the collector's greed.

"It is not only lapis, but it is old and of a very

good period—middle Ming at the latest. That carving is delightful. I never saw better," he said.

"I never had anything I liked half as much," said Miss Timmins, almost in a tone of enthusiasm. "That Ki'lin's head is so quietly carved—no squiggles about it. And, of course, it's lucky—'The footsteps of the Ki'lin bring good fortune,' you know. I do like it."

"I spent over two hundred at that sale, and this was the best thing in it, and I never saw it," he said gloomily.

"I did," said Miss Timmins again, with that aggravating superiority.

He looked at her rather queerly and not quite amiably. He was a collector. He said bitterly: "I thought nobody could come near my cloak-hooks—no English collector, that is. And here you go and get one that is better than any I have and completely wipe my eye."

The waiter brought the oysters; Lord Scredington handed her coat back to her; she hung it over the back of her chair so that the cloak-hook was directly under his eye, deliberately. She ate her oysters and drank a glass of Chablis with great enjoyment. Her dinner at half-past twelve had not been large, and she had cooked it herself. Lord Scredington had been quite right when he said that her appetite was equal to another meal.

She found it a truly enjoyable meal. After the oysters came a sole Morny, a bird, a bombe pralinée, and cheese-straws, all admirable. After a glass of champagne, the heart of Miss Timmins recovered

its natural warmth and she looked upon the world and even upon Lord Scredington with kindly eyes.

He kept her laughing most of the time. They had plenty of subjects in common—jade and lacquer and netsuke and Japanese sword-guards, the dealers who dealt in them, the collectors who collected them. It was for the most part the things that he said about the dealers and collectors that made her laugh. But all through lunch his eyes would now and again wander uneasily and a trifle greedily from her charming face to the lapis lazuli cloak-hook. He did not ask her if she would have a liqueur with her coffee; he ordered Grand Marniers, gave her an admirable cigarette, and lit a cigar. Then he said in careless enough accents: "How much did you pay for that cloak-hook?"

"Thirty-eight shillings," said Miss Timmins in a tone of pleasant satisfaction, for since, now that she was his guest, he had been careful to address her neither as Baby nor Beulah darling, she was at peace with all the world.

"Thirty-eight shillings!" he cried in astonished and rather indignant accents. "Why, if I'd seen it I should have left a commission of thirty pounds—to make fairly sure of getting it. And I expect that if I'd been at the sale and anyone had bid me up, I should have gone to sixty for it."

"The best thing in a sale often does go quite cheap," said Miss Timmins complacently, but with an air of the widest experience. "But I never expected to get this cloak-hook, though I wanted it ever so badly. I thought it was certain to go for much more

than I could afford. But somehow everyone seemed to miss it. And I bought it with my own money too, not Dad's. So it's my very own."

"Some people have all the luck," said Lord Scredington, gazing at her with gloomy eyes.

Miss Timmins was taken aback. She stared at him as if she could not believe her ears; then she leaned forward and said indignantly: "I like that! It's you that has all the luck, not me! Just look at you!"

Lord Scredington rose, walked to a mirror on the opposite side of the room, surveyed himself in it solemnly, came back and sat down.

"I can't see it, and I've looked as hard as hard," he said sorrowfully.

Miss Timmins was taken aback by his action, but she recovered herself enough to say indignantly: "Why, of course you have! Look at what you've got!"

"Look at what you've got," he retorted. "Youth, beauty, a real flair for the really beautiful thing, and a lapis lazuli cloak-hook the like of which is not to be found in the world!"

"And you've got all that, except the cloak-hook and heaps of money and a title!" said Miss Timmins, almost in a tone of exasperation.

"Dust and ashes—dust and ashes without that cloak-hook," he said in sorrowful accents. "How much did you say you wanted for it?"

Again Miss Timmins was taken aback. She had bought the cloak-hook for her very own, and it had been a great and deliberate extravagance. But she

delighted in it for itself, besides delighting in the fact that she had the most beautiful coat-fastener in London.

"It isn't for sale. I'm going to keep it," she said quickly and firmly.

"Don't be a dog in the manger," he said in imploring accents. "You don't collect cloak-hooks, and I do. I'll give you twenty-five pounds for it."

Miss Timmins hesitated. Twenty-five pounds! And all her own! Frocks, shoes, stockings, gloves! She had never had as much money or anything like as much money at any time in her life! Then of a sudden a queer resentment flared up in her. Why should she be robbed of her only treasure, the only real treasure she had ever had?

She shook her head and said obstinately: "No. It isn't for sale."

"Thirty-five pounds—forty pounds," said Lord Scredington slowly, in the voice of the tempter.

Miss Timmins shook her head. Her so kissable lips were set again in a firm, thin, red line.

Lord Scredington gazed at her earnestly; his lips curved a little at the corners in a way she did not like. He said: "Well, sixty then. I said I should have gone to sixty if I'd been at Farringdon's and anyone bid it up."

Sixty pounds! Miss Timmins was fairly dazzled. Then a bigger, and almost furious wave of revolt surged through her. No; she would not be robbed of her treasure! Above all, Lord Scredington should not have it. He had everything, everything that anyone could want; but he should not have the lapis lazuli cloak-hook.

"No. I won't sell it—not for anything!" she said fiercely.

He laughed gently at her fierceness. Then he said: "The heart of a tiger—an Hyrcanian tigress." Then he added mournfully, with an insight that surprised her: "I believe you won't sell it just because it's I who want it—even when I offer you three times as much as you'd get from anyone else. You don't like me."

But Miss Timmins did like him; she liked him more than a respectable girl who kept herself to herself ought to like such a wicked young nobleman.

"I don't mind you," she said in the tone of one making a kindly concession.

"I knew you didn't like me," he said in inexpressibly mournful accents that made her feel she was being rather unkind, though she only half believed that they were sincere. "Why don't you like me?"

She hesitated, thinking it out; then she said: "Oh! I don't know. But you seem——"

She stopped short.

"What do I seem?" he asked in a tone of considerable interest.

She hesitated again; then said: "You seem to think that every girl ought to be in love with you."

Then she wished she had not said it. It was a silly thing to say, though true.

"No, no! not every girl! Only every pretty girl. And that's quite fair, for I fall in love with them—always—all of them," he protested.

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself for being so silly," said Miss Timmins with great severity.

"I was humbugging," he said. "I was merely agreeing with you, as a polite host should. But, as a matter of fact, I have the most constant disposition in London. I only love one girl. I have never loved any other, as you must know quite well. Think of the months and months I've been in love, hopelessly in love, with you, in spite of your always being so hard on me."

"Don't be so silly," said Miss Timmins sharply, irritated that he had started teasing her again.

He sighed deeply and said sadly: "Yours is a hard, unsympathetic nature."

"It isn't anything of the kind!" she said with considerable heat.

He was silent for a little while, looking at her queerly. Then he gave her another cigarette and again began to talk about their common subjects—beautiful things, sales, prices and dealers. At a quarter to four she said that she must be going home.

"Oh, no," he said firmly. "We never go home before half-past six. It wouldn't be right. Besides, a quarter of an hour from now the dancing will begin, and after two lunches what you need is healthy exercise." He dropped his bantering tone and added: "Do stay and dance a little, please."

Miss Timmins hesitated. She was fond of dancing. She had never danced in such magnificent surroundings: for her the Palais de Dance at Hammersmith had been the last word in dancing-rooms. This room looked as if it would be even more delightful, so much more intimate. Having hesitated, she was lost.

"It would be very nice," she said.

"Splendid!" said Lord Scredington.

It was an experiment and he was doubtful about it. He found that he had been wise to make it; she danced very well, and at the end of half a dozen dances they had found their common rhythm and were enjoying it immensely. Her evident delight in it braced him to unusual activity, and they danced nearly every dance. When at last, after a parting cocktail, the afternoon came to an end, she felt that she had enjoyed the afternoon of a lifetime and was deeply grateful to Lord Scredington for having given it to her, though she did not let that gratitude be too clearly seen.

He drove her home in a taxi. At the door of the shop they said good-night, and she thanked him for the pleasant time he had given her. He said that now that he had discovered that she was the only partner in the world with whom it was really delightful to dance, they would have many pleasant times together. She did not tell him that they would have nothing of the kind, that such pleasant times with such a wicked nobleman were not to be thought of; but she told herself so, firmly.

Then, as he shook hands with her, he said: "I shall have that cloak-hook off you, you know. I mean to have it. Ahab at five stone seven, that's what I am."

"You won't!" said Miss Timmins confidently.

CHAPTER II

A CUP AND SAUCER

THE shop of Mr. Timmins in Devonshire Street, Theobald's Road, was small; but, unlike most curio shops of its class, it was neither dirty nor crowded. Miss Timmins had a gift of displaying objects of art to advantage. Indeed, some of her customers wondered why the things they bought from her never looked as well in their more spacious rooms as they had looked in that little shop. There were not many objects of art in it and none of them were expensive; they were objects of art for the collector of moderate means—half of them European, half of them Oriental.

Miss Timmins found her father on a chair behind the counter, reading the latest publication of that fond and curious sect which asserts that the Anglo-Saxon races are the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel, and in the most unmannerly fashion calls them "Brits." His dim, blue eyes looked upon the world through old-fashioned, horn spectacles; his lank grey hair hung half-way down his Gladstonian collar; his black tie was narrow; his frock coat was dingy; his slippers were of felt. His mind was too full of

the past and future of the Brits to have room in it for much else, and he had written a monograph on Hebraic symbolism in early British art, which, in spite of the scorn of the archæologists, was highly prized as evidence by other members of the sect, and had raised him to a considerable eminence in it.

Miss Timmins told him of her bad luck in the matter of the netsuke and that Lord Scredington had compelled her to lunch with him by threatening to sob on her shoulder in Conduit Street.

"And he'd have done it too, Daddy. I know he would," she added in a rather bitter tone.

Mr. Timmins laughed. "I like that young gentleman," he said, in approving accents. "He's always in such good spirits—so cheerful, so full of life. And it's very rare to find a young man in his position so unspoilt and with so little side."

"He has a very good opinion of himself," Miss Timmins protested, for she did not wish to have too favourable an opinion of the wicked young nobleman.

"And a good thing too," said Mr. Timmins with decision. "You never have people having a good opinion of you unless you have a good opinion of yourself."

"I'm afraid he's a bad lot all the same. Everybody says he is; and he has got into the papers twice—in the divorce court," said Miss Timmins with a virtuous air.

"High spirits—merely high spirits," said Mr. Timmins tolerantly. "Vital people are seldom moral."

Miss Timmins looked at him with disapproval and

protested. "You do say such queer things, Daddy. I'm sure I have plenty of life in me."

"You have had the advantage of a better upbringing than Lord Scredington, my dear. Besides, I was talking of men," said her father.

"Then they ought to be ashamed of themselves," said Miss Timmins with a yet more virtuous air.

She went up to her bedroom and changed into an older frock and relieved her father in the shop, allowing him to read *The Brits' Journal* more comfortably in his chair in the parlour. She spent her time polishing some soft-metal Japanese sword-guards till seven o'clock; then she shut the shop. At half-past seven she set about getting their supper. She did not allow her father to read at supper because she had been told it was bad for the digestion. She talked to him about Thibault's and its decoration, which she could not wholly approve, being a purist in such matters, as was natural after her long association with beautiful things, and about the music and the floor and the admirable dancing of Lord Scredington. He was somewhat surprised to learn that she had spent all the afternoon with that young nobleman and looked a trifle grave. But he did not say anything about it. After all, he reflected, she had run him and the house and the shop for the last seven years and knew her way about the world better than most women of thirty.

For her part, she did not tell him that Lord Scredington had offered her sixty pounds for the cloak-hook. A sense of guilt was beginning to invade her. She ought not to have refused that splendid

offer. Besides frocks and hats and stockings and gloves for herself, that sixty pounds would have enabled her to pay some bills that were troubling her and to add to their stock of objects of art. Yes; she would have to sell the cloak-hook. Then she hardened her heart and told herself that she would do nothing of the kind. Sixty pounds or no sixty pounds, Lord Scredington should not have the cloak-hook.

Their supper was simple enough, but they lingered over it, and it was nearly nine before they had finished. Miss Timmins had just cleared the table when the door-bell rang. She opened it to find Mr. Thomas Anderson on the threshold and invited him to come in. A rising young cabinet-maker, he was a friend of the family. He ought to have been a humble friend of the family, for he was the son of the charwoman who had come in twice a week to do the rough work when Miss Timmins was a little girl, and her mother was not strong enough to do all the work of the house and shop herself, and was, besides, frequently ailing. But he was not humble. Indeed, so far from humble was he, that he cherished the firmest resolve to marry Miss Timmins directly he could persuade her to marry him. She took him into the parlour; he greeted her father and said he would not sit down, but wait till she had put on her hat to come to the pictures with him.

As a rule she was fond of the pictures, and she liked to go with Tom Anderson because, having given much of her time to the improvement of his mind, he had always plenty to say about any film

they saw. But to-night she did not feel inclined to see a film. After dancing with Lord Scredington at Thibault's in the afternoon, to go to the pictures with Tom Anderson in the evening was distasteful to her; it seemed incongruous. She said that she was tired and did not feel like going out. So Tom Anderson sat down in his usual seat and waited to hear from Mr. Timmins something important about the past and the future of the Brits.

But Mr. Timmins's mind was running on Beulah's afternoon with Lord Scredington.

"Beulah's been dancing in gilded halls with the aristocracy," he said in rather proud accents.

"She has, has she?" said Tom without any great pleasure in his tone.

"Not with all of them," said Miss Timmins; "only with one."

That was not any better hearing for Tom Anderson, and he said rather grumpily: "Which one?"

"Lord Scredington," said Miss Timmins.

"That young feller who spends all his life at sales when he isn't in the divorce court?" said Tom, and his tone was rather unpleasant, for he had heard about Lord Scredington from Miss Timmins more than once.

"He's only been in the divorce court twice; and the second time he was acquitted," said Miss Timmins, correcting him coldly.

She knew that Tom was resolved to marry her; but since she was resolved that he should do nothing of the kind, she was careful to give him no encouragement.

Tom, who was of a democratic spirit, was annoyed

that she should have spent the afternoon dancing with a man who would certainly be described by his democratic friends as a dissolute young peer. But he thought it wiser not to show his annoyance. He had good reasons to believe that Miss Timmins had, for the time being at any rate, no intention of letting him marry her, and he knew that she enjoyed considerable strength of character. He knew that she was fond of him in a sisterly way, for she had known him and seen him nearly every day ever since he was eight and she was four, and he had looked after her in a brotherly way ever since he was sixteen and she was twelve. But he did not think that that sisterly feeling would be of much use to him in gaining the desire of his heart. He thought, indeed, that he would be better without it, and he was sure that he would not change it to something warmer without an immense effort. He let the subject drop. It was a subject on which he might become tactless.

Mr. Timmins also let it drop, and began to tell them about the latest efforts of the propagandists to spread the truth about the Brits, and the enormous part they were to play in the future of the world. Then Mr. Kettleby came and joined them. Mr. Kettleby professed as strong a belief in the theory of the Brits as Mr. Timmins himself, and this common doctrine had drawn the two men together, so that though he had only lived in the neighbourhood a couple of years he had become Mr. Timmins's closest friend. But Miss Timmins did not like him, for he was a stout, blond, bland man, with a large square face and small eyes set far too near together, a very

soapy voice and manner; he was old enough to be her father, and she had had no little difficulty in making it clear to him that his desire to be her closest friend as well as her father's was not likely to be fulfilled.

However, she welcomed him politely enough, and opened a large bottle of beer and filled the glasses of the three men. Her father and Mr. Kettleby talked with enthusiasm about the latest discoveries of the propagandists. Thomas, as was natural in one of his name, showed himself a doubter, and raised objections to those discoveries. Miss Timmins, who had her own opinion of the Brits and their propagandists and their past and their future, got to her sewing and did not listen to a word they said, for it was not likely that she would hear anything that she had not heard before, and if she did it would not be of the slightest interest to her.

She was able to think of Thibault's and Lord Scredington and the things he had said, and their dancing, with as perfect a concentration as if none of the other three were in the room. So the evening wore through till it was time to go to bed.

The next morning she found her conscience still uneasy about her refusal of sixty pounds for the cloak-hook. By way of soothing it she put on an old hat and an old coat and skirt, and went out to hunt through the junk shops. She took the tube to King's Cross, and went to those mean streets that lie to the north and east of it. She examined carefully the windows of many shops: curiosity shops, second-hand furniture dealers', pawn-brokers', small watch-makers'

shops, and those dirty little veritable junk shops in which all the odds and ends of the world are gathered together. She went into many of them and looked round the tables and shelves. She had almost given up hope of a find that day, when she saw on a shelf in the window of a little curiosity shop a Worcester saucer, of the best period, with a coat-of-arms on it. It was certainly a piece belonging to a historic service; of interest, but of very little value without the cup. But, as it chanced, she knew where a cup which matched it was. She had been seeing it for months on a shelf at the back of Mr. Blenkinsop's shop in Broad Street. She had dealings with Mr. Blenkinsop; and they had talked about the cup more than once. She knew that Mr. Blenkinsop had nearly lost hope of finding a saucer to match it.

She went into the shop and asked the dealer if he had the cup as well as the saucer. The dealer was short with her, saying with bitterness that if he had had the cup as well as the saucer he would have neither now, but a couple of quid profit in his pocket. Miss Timmins pitied him for his ignorance; there was a great deal more than a couple of pounds profit in that cup and saucer. But she made no effort to enlighten him. She held that a man should know his job. She knew hers.

"It's a pity you haven't got the cup," she said sadly.

"A pity? It's a blarsted shyme," he said ferociously.

His language cost him exactly eighteen-pence. She gave him only three-and-sixpence for the saucer instead of the five shillings he asked.

She returned to Devonshire Street, delighted. She had a feeling that this piece of luck was a sign that the High Gods were not really displeased with her for refusing Lord Scredington's offer, that she might yet make shift to keep her treasure.

During the afternoon she stayed in the shop and sold a small Imari vase for eighteen shillings, making a reasonable profit of eleven shillings on it. That evening they had no visitors, and as she sewed and her father read, she once more gave her mind to Lord Scredington and her afternoon at Thibault's.

Her mind was getting clearer about Lord Scredington. She had to admit that she did not dislike him as she ought, though there was no blinking that fact that he had behaved disgracefully in trying to kiss her, in kissing her, in fact, several times, when she had taken that jade plaque to his flat. She resented bitterly his treating her as she fondly believed he would have never have dreamt of treating a girl of his own class.

If you had asked her what her politics were, she would have said proudly that she was a Conservative, but what she really was, was an unconscious Democrat.

No, she could not dislike him as she ought. She suspected that his smile had no little to do with this failure; but also he had been quite polite, even respectful and sympathetic, during the afternoon at Thibault's, and certainly he had given her the afternoon of a lifetime. Nevertheless, she told herself confidently that he should never have the lapis lazuli cloak-hook. She told herself this several times to make herself feel more confident. Even after she

was in bed and quite warm the thought of his getting it from her made her shiver.

As always, she was up early to let in the charwoman who did the rough work. She herself swept out the shop and dusted the objects of art, stopping now and then to polish one of them. Then she made the coffee, and saw to it that the charwoman fried the eggs and bacon to her father's liking. She was in good spirits; she was going to sell some time during the day an old Worcester tea-cup and saucer at a good profit.

Soon after ten she put on her prettiest frock and hat and wrapped up the saucer in several thicknesses of tissue paper, and then in brown paper and put it, along with some spare tissue and brown paper, in the expensive Russia leather attaché case, in which she carried objects of art to customers who collected them. She had made up her mind that that Russia leather attaché case, in combination with her prettiest frock and hat, enabled her to ask pounds more for objects of art than if it had been ordinary pig-skin.

She walked briskly to Blenkinsop's shop in Broad Street. It was larger and lighter than her father's shop, and had in it many better pieces. But to her mind it was much too full, and those pieces were too badly displayed to sell as they should have sold.

Mr. Blenkinsop, a slim, pasty-faced, worried man, the last man in the world to be a dealer, since he looked always to be suffering from an inferiority complex, a fatal defect in a man who would sell things at a profit, smiled wanly at Miss Timmins, whom he regarded as a sympathetic companion in misfortune.

Since she wished to buy the Worcester cup from him she did not greet him with smiling cheerfulness, but with an air of depression, and at once began to talk gloomily about the depressed condition of business, and then asked him if he could let her have some cheap netsuke, since she had a customer of moderate means for them. He could not.

She sighed a sigh of disappointment and looked round the shop; then she said mournfully: "You don't seem to have any luck with that Worcester cup."

"I have quite given up hope of finding a saucer to match it. I've looked everywhere for it," he said gloomily.

She did not tell him that he had not looked everywhere for it; she said: "I wonder if I should have any better luck with it than you?"

Just a faint brightness broke through the gloom on Mr. Blenkinsop's face at the prospect of selling the cup.

"Of course you would. You're so much younger, and the young people have all the luck," he said with decision.

"Oh, do they?" said Miss Timmins. "I haven't found it so, I can tell you. But I don't mind trying, and I'll give you a pound for it."

Mr. Blenkinsop shook his head and said: "I can't take less than thirty shillings for it. It cost me twenty-five."

After a short discussion she gave him twenty-seven-and-six for the cup, and made him wash and polish it in the little room behind the shop, fitted up for clean-

ing and repairing works of art. Then she wrapped it up, put it into her attaché case with the saucer, and took her way to the house of Mrs. MacArthur, in West Street, Mayfair.

She was shown into a drawing-room much too full of glass-fronted cabinets, overcrowded with the most expensive examples of British ceramic art. None of them said anything to Miss Timmins. Her liking was for the beautiful things of the East. She looked at the porcelain in two of the cabinets and sniffed, faintly but distinctly.

Mrs. MacArthur, a large, stout, enthusiastic collector, came hurrying. Miss Timmins unwrapped the cup and saucer. They delighted Mrs. MacArthur; but she protested loudly and shrilly that she could not pay twelve and a half guineas for them. Miss Timmins had never supposed that she would. She allowed herself to be beaten down to ten guineas, cash, and received that sum in notes.

Then, as she was leaving in a very good temper, Mrs. MacArthur said: "That's a pretty coat-fastener you've got. Lapis, isn't it?"

Miss Timmins said that it was.

"I do love lapis, and lots of people I know are using those Chinese buckles in jade or agate or amethyst quartz for their evening cloaks. If you'd care to part with it, I'll give you five pounds for it."

"I have refused sixty for it," said Miss Timmins gently, but rather coldly. "It's not only a very beautiful piece, but no one has ever seen one like it."

"Sixty pounds?" cried Mrs. MacArthur, taken considerably aback. "I wish I could afford to wear

a sixty-pound buckle to fasten my coat! You dealers seem to be always rolling in money!"

Miss Timmins did not say that she was rolling in money, and she did not say that she was not rolling in money. She was pleased to have made this impression of affluence on a good customer. She left Mayfair, pleased with herself for having brought off a profitable sale, and even more pleased because the nine pounds profit on it would postpone the necessity of selling the cloak-hook. On the way home she paid a pressing bill with part of the nine pounds.

CHAPTER III

LORD SCREDINGTON GETS HIS OWN WAY

WHEN she reached home she was in two minds whether to take the cloak-hook off her coat and make a little silk bag for it, so that she could carry it about with her, or leave it on her coat. The possibility of losing it had made it so much dearer to her. She decided to leave it on her coat because it made such an excellent impression on customers.

Her father had sold nothing during the morning, and she sold nothing during the afternoon. That did not distress her; often they sold nothing for four or five days running. But then a collector whose dividends had come in, or who had made or come into some unexpected money, might come in on the fifth or sixth or any other day and treat himself to several objects of art at once.

It was a gloomy evening, and a drizzling rain was falling. No one would be likely to spend money on objects of art on such an evening, and she was on the point of shutting up the shop when there entered G. Higgins, a successful, but mottled, dealer in objects of art in Oxford Street.

“Good evening, Miss Timmins,” he said in the brisk, business-like accents of a man who goes straight to the point. “I saw you wearing one of those Chinese lapis buckle-tongues at Farrington’s sale on Tuesday. I’ve got a customer, and I can give you a good price for it.”

Miss Timmins was apt to think quickly; and at once it occurred to her that G. Higgins had not noticed the cloak-hook at Farrington’s. She had been sitting at the table when he came in, and he had sat down at least seven places away from her on the same side of the table, and had risen and gone out before she did. Therefore, he had not seen the cloak-hook. G. Higgins was telling the tale, and it seemed quite an unnecessary tale to tell. Then the truth flashed on her: he was an emissary of Lord Scredington.

Lord Scredington had not been fortunate in his choice of an emissary, for she did not like G. Higgins. She did not like his manner or his manners. More than once he had tried to hector her out of a piece, for which he had a customer, at a quite unfair price. He had not succeeded in doing so; but she had resented his thinking so lightly of her as to believe that he could. But twice he had succeeded in hectoring a piece out of her father at an unfair price, when she was not in the shop. That had annoyed her even more. He was a large, red-faced man, with large red hands, who should have been a pork-butcher.

She said coldly: “Yes: I’ve got a lapis buckle-tongue, the finest buckle-tongue that ever came out

of China. But I am not selling it. I want it to wear."

"You want it to wear? Come, come, young woman, that isn't business! And I don't mind telling you that if ever you mix fancies with business you're done," said G. Higgins in portentous accents. "I'll give you a rattling good price for that buckle-tongue—I'll give you six pounds."

His large, red face radiated a crimson generosity.

"I should think you would," said Miss Timmins, in a voice in which there was no note of gratitude.

G. Higgins's face grew even redder as he rose from six to ten, then to twelve, then to fifteen pounds; and his voice rose with him. Miss Timmins was quiet and cold and even disdainful. Her face did not grow red; her voice did not rise. At fifteen pounds G. Higgins was mopping his crimson brow.

He had never liked Miss Timmins; he had often said that he did not like her, that she was a hard little case. He liked his fellow creatures soft, susceptible to the tales he told. On this occasion he found that he liked her less than ever. He rose to twenty pounds; and again his voice rose with him.

"Don't bellow. You're not in a china shop," said Miss Timmins rather harshly.

The eyes of G. Higgins came a little out of their sockets to look at her more closely, and as they came out they saw red. Had he not been so very eager to make some money, he would have become furiously abusive. He rose, slowly, and with less vehemence, to thirty pounds. Miss Timmins, still unimpressed, said that she had been offered more than that for it.

He did not believe her; he believed that she was merely displaying the cussedness of her sex. He seldom got on well with women, and had often noticed this quality in those with whom he had come in contact. With an effort that wrenched his very heart-strings he rose to forty pounds. With the same hard and callous air Miss Timmins said coldly that she had refused more than that for it.

G. Higgins had seen the forty pounds profit, of which he had been so certain, sink to ten, and it seemed, indeed it was plain, that there was not even a profit of ten pounds. He turned blackish in the face, a broken man. His appearance rather frightened Miss Timmins: it was rather horrible—in an apoplectic way.

Broken as he was, he made a last grand effort and said in a trembling, husky voice, "I'll give you forty-five."

Miss Timmins's eyes, which had not once beamed on him, grew a trifle more unfriendly, as she said in icy accents: "You won't."

"Gr-r-r-r!" said Mr. Higgins, remaining inarticulate by a tremendous effort.

There was something in Miss Timmins's beautiful blue eyes that discouraged speech, the only kind of speech of which he was at the moment capable.

He staggered out of the shop, drooping. About forty yards down the street he did become articulate, with gestures.

Men and women who passed him wondered at him.

He tottered into the first public-house in Theobald's

Road. He shrank from the thought of his next meeting with Lord Scredington. He had pooh-poohed Lord Scredington's suggestion that he was over-confident about getting the lapis cloak-hook from Miss Timmins, and the next time he met him that nimble-tongued young nobleman would say things to him, things that would rankle.

G. Higgins sometimes said to his friends: "His Lordship sometimes treats me as if I was dirt under his feet."

This was true. Lord Scredington was very little fonder of G. Higgins than was Miss Timmins.

Miss Timmins had smiled a smile that was not at all kindly at the dropping back of G. Higgins as he left the shop. She was pleased to have killed two birds with one stone, infuriated G. Higgins and disappointed Lord Scredington. That evening she allowed Tom Anderson to take her to the "Pictures." He asked her a question or two, with a sufficiently careless air, about the afternoon at Thibault's. She had an impression that it was weighing a little on his mind.

The next morning Lord Scredington came himself. Evidently he had rung up G. Higgins, or called upon him, and learnt of his failure. He greeted Miss Timmins with perfect politeness—neither as "Baby" nor as "Beulah darling." He walked about the shop looking at the objects of art, which he had seen several times before, for none of them were new, and said pleasant and not wholly truthful things about them. Miss Timmins was neither deceived nor softened. She was inclined to pity and despise him for stooping to

get round her, and for supposing that he could get round her. She had a feeling that he desired to get the better of her even more keenly than he desired the cloak-hook.

Then he came to the business that had brought him and said: "Well, you've had three nights' good sleep on my offer for that cloak-hook. Are you going to take the sixty pounds for it?"

"No, thank you," said Miss Timmins in her very politest accents.

"Oh, woman in our hours of ease!" he said mournfully. "You know you want that sixty pounds ever so much more than you want that cloak-hook. It's just your malignant desire to thwart the simple wish of an innocent soul."

"What innocent soul?" said Miss Timmins innocently. "Who were you going to give it to?"

"Myself—it's going to be the gem of my collection."

"Well, it wasn't a very polite thing to say," said Miss Timmins, looking hurt without feeling at all hurt.

"How can you expect a man, robbed of the desire of his heart by an Hyrcanian tigress, to display the manners of a Chesterfield?" he asked with some heat.

"I *don't* expect you to," said Miss Timmins quickly and with manifest sincerity.

He heaved a loud, pathetic sigh, and said: "The heart of a *steel* Hyrcanian tigress. But I tell you what: my Uncle Charles has been dying to give me fifty pounds for an amethyst figure of Tung-fang-so for the last three months. I'll give you that figure and twenty-five pounds for the cloak-hook."

LORD SCREDINGTON GETS HIS OWN WAY 41

It was a splendid offer, and once more Miss Timmins hesitated. Then suddenly she grew very angry indeed. It was an offer she had no right whatever to refuse, and she was angry with Lord Scredington for making it. He had no right to tempt her so.

She said with real fierceness: "No. I won't sell you the cloak-hook. You shall never have it—never! Why should you have everything?"

His blue eyes sparkled on her, and he laughed joyously, quite careless of her anger, and said: "But, of course I shall have it. I always get everything I want very badly. So your refusing to let me have it is really quite hopeless. But we won't go on squabbling about it. Let's go along to Thibault's and have lunch."

Miss Timmins refused the invitation with freezing politeness.

"But it's your duty to cheer me up after my disappointment," he said. "Look how I cheered you up after yours the other day. Do come."

Miss Timmins again refused the invitation with freezing politeness.

Then he really did annoy her. He said that he could not waste her time for nothing and insisted on buying a third-rate ginger jar. It could be of no possible use to him; she told him that he did not want it; she almost refused to sell it to him.

"If you don't let me have it, I shall call a policeman and get him to order you to sell it to me. It's on sale, and I have as much right to buy it as any member of the public," he said firmly.

"Fetch a policeman!" said Miss Timmins fiercely. "I don't care for any policeman."

"Oh, if you're are not going to listen to a policeman, there's only one thing to be done. Is that jar yours or your father's?"

"Now, don't you go disturbing Daddy. He's reading," she said quickly.

"I'm sorry. But business is business, as the Australian poet sings. Besides, I can't allow you to rob your father—it's only one step from parricide. I *must* disturb him," he said, stepping towards the door into the parlour.

"Oh, take the beastly jar! Have your own way if you will be so babyish!" cried Miss Timmins in the last exasperation, and she began to wrap up the jar.

It was not the kind of thing that would make a nice, neat parcel that a gentleman of fashion might carry in the streets of London, but it need not have been the baggy and clumsy object she made it.

But he bade her good-bye and carried it away, smiling most amiably.

She told herself how thoroughly she detested him. How glad she was she had not let him have the cloak-hook!

When, on the Saturday, she made her weekly examination of their financial position, she found that the nine pounds she had made out of the Worcester cup and saucer had not gone nearly far enough in easing that financial position, and she was assailed by the cold and saddening conviction that sooner or later she would have to sell the cloak-hook

to him. The thought was almost sickening. At any rate, she would only sell it to him at the last possible moment. She went upstairs to her bedroom to look at it and fondle it; she loved it more than ever.

She believed that she had choked Lord Scredington off for the time being, possibly even for a week or two. She was wrong: on the Monday morning Mrs. MacArthur came to the shop in her car. Miss Timmins was out on a feverish hunt through the junk shops in the hope that some extraordinary piece of luck would save her from parting with her treasure. Mrs. MacArthur told Mr. Timmins that she had come to buy a lapis lazuli cloak-hook his daughter had been using to fasten her coat, that she would give sixty guineas for it.

Mr. Timmins was startled and delighted. He had noticed that Beulah used an Oriental cloak-hook as a coat-fastener; but he had not taken the trouble to look at it, for Oriental objects of art were of no interest to him. He told Mrs. MacArthur that his daughter was out, but that he would tell her when she came home, and she would certainly let her have it. Mrs. MacArthur went away, pleased, and when Beulah, having hunted in vain, returned in time to cook their dinner, he told her, joyfully, of the offer. Miss Timmins was astonished and rather pleased. She would not feel the loss of the cloak-hook nearly as much if it went to Mrs. MacArthur and not to Lord Scredington. Then suspicion awoke in her. Now that she came to think of it, Mrs. MacArthur was a friend, or at any rate an acquaintance, of Lord Scredington; she had seen them

chatting together at Farringdon's and Sotheby's and Christie's. Another emissary! Mrs. MacArthur should not have the cloak-hook.

She found it hard to keep to this resolution, for her father was so delighted at the thought of the relief it would be to her to get the bills paid—bills never troubled him since he dwelt in a sphere above them—and have the money to buy two or three really good pieces, on which there would be a really good profit, for the shop. Her duty was clearer than ever. She began to weaken.

The clearer it became that she would have to part with it, the dearer the cloak-hook grew. The thought of parting with it began veritably to harass her. The thought that it would go to Lord Scredington, since he was the only person who would give sixty pounds for it, grew even bitterer. Again and again she asked herself why he should have everything and she so little, just because he happened to be born the son of a wealthy peer. She was moving fast from her democratic position towards a Socialism of a distinctly reddish hue. She went about the world, gloomy; she even began to look a trifle peaked.

She let the days slip by without taking her treasure to Mrs. MacArthur. She could not bring herself to do so. Her attachment to it became rather an obsession. One night indeed, before falling asleep, she found herself crying at the thought of having to let it go. She roused herself with a jerk. This was childish; and she was angry with herself.

The next morning she at last made up her mind that she would sell the cloak-hook. Then she could

not decide whether to sell it to Mrs. MacArthur for sixty guineas or to sell it to Lord Scredington himself for the amethyst Tung-fang-so and twenty-five pounds. Since she had to part with it, the sensible thing to do was to get the most she could for it. But to sell it to him directly would indeed be painful. In the end she decided that she could not do this, that she would sell it to Mrs. MacArthur. But even then she postponed the sale. She went about the world looking into dealers' shops for two or three good pieces for which she had customers to whom she would sell them at a really good profit. It was a search which, in the ordinary course, she would have loved; to-day her heart was not in it.

The miracle happened in South Moulton Street.

She was looking rather listlessly in the window of the shop of Mr. Burbadge, a shop almost entirely devoted to the sale of European objects of art, when her eyes fell on a lapis lazuli cloak-hook, the very spit of the one on her coat. Her heart jumped quite violently at the sight of it.

She took off her coat before going into the shop and folded it so that the cloak-hook was not visible. Mr. Burbadge had sometimes let her have a piece she wanted for a customer at a reasonable price; sometimes she had let him have a piece at a reasonable price.

He was a courtly man, but not strictly tactful; he greeted her with a friendly smile and said: "How are you, little lady? You're not looking quite as bright as usual."

Miss Timmins knew well that she was not looking

quite as bright as usual; there was no need for anyone to tell her so; but she smiled at him and said: "Oh, I'm all right, Mr. Burbadge. You can't expect everybody to look as fit and well as you do."

"I take care of myself—I take care of myself," said Mr. Burbadge, preening himself "What can I do for you, little lady?"

"I can see you're beginning to go in for Oriental stuff," said Miss Timmins. "I shan't be able to make a living if all you rich men go in for it. What do you want for that piece of lapis? I've got a customer who goes in for that kind of thing, and I think I could do with it—at a reasonable price."

Mr. Burbadge laughed importantly—it was pleasing to be looked up to as a rich man by a lady so attractive as Miss Timmins—and he took the cloak-hook from the window.

He looked at it with cold and rather disapproving eyes and said: "Queer stuff, this Chinese stuff. I can't think what people think they see in it. There's always something odd about it, generally grotesque. I was asking a tenner for this piece because it's lapis. But I can let you have it for seven pound. That ought to give both of us a profit."

It was Miss Timmins's habit always to pay dealers cash: it made their pieces more reasonable. She had a blank cheque in her pocket and she sat down at the counter and filled it up with fingers that trembled a little.

She handed the cheque to Mr. Burbadge and he wrapped up the cloak-hook in tissue paper and gave

it to her, saying in a cheerful, paternal fashion : " A good day's work for both of us, I hope."

Miss Timmins said that she indeed hoped so ; but she felt bound to linger, chatting pleasantly with him, for a little while. When she did leave his shop she walked at an astonishing pace to the Maison Lyons and ordered a cup of chocolate and a cream bun, a luxurious repast in which she seldom indulged herself, and unwrapped the cloak-hook and examined it minutely and at length, comparing it with its fellow on her coat.

It was an astonishing find ; but Miss Timmins was not greatly astonished that she had found it. Those who traffic in beautiful things, if they love them, live in a world of strange chances, a world in which there seems to be more good luck and more bad luck than in the commonplace world stuffed with the painful efforts of mass producers. The two cloak-hooks had been carved from the same chunk of lapis lazuli, and certainly by the same man. The heads of the Ki'lins were alike to a millimetre, as only an Oriental could get them. But a slight variation in the curve of the shank of the new one made it finer and more delightful than that of the old one. As she drank her chocolate and ate her cream bun, Miss Timmins studied and studied the two cloak-hooks and pondered them. Yes ; the new one undoubtedly had it. In the end she decided that that was the one she would keep ; for all that by selling the old one to Mrs. MacArthur, she would let Lord Scredington have his way exactly.

She came out of the palatial hall of the Maison

Lyons radiant, the very spirit of spring in a small four-and-a-penny hat. She took a bus home and took the first cloak-hook out of her coat. But she did not put the new one in its place. The time had not come for that. She went down into the shop and took from the cabinet an ordinary agate cloak-hook to serve for the time being.

Then she went to West Street and was shown straight into Mrs. MacArthur in her boudoir. As she wrote out the cheque for sixty guineas, that good lady congratulated her enviously on looking so fresh and well.

Miss Timmins admitted that she was feeling well.

She took her leave of Mrs. MacArthur and paid the cheque into the bank and went home rejoicing. It is given to few to have their cake and eat it too. On this occasion it was given to her. She had the sixty guineas and she had the most beautiful piece of lapis lazuli in Europe, probably in the world.

She did not fix the new cloak-hook in her coat; she put it into a cabinet so that when she was behind the counter it was to her hand. In a pleasing satisfaction she waited for Lord Scredington to come to crow over her. She had not long to wait. On the afternoon of the second day he came into the shop, wearing rather the expression of a cat that had got at the cream and got away with it. Deceitfully, he asked her if she had picked up any hard stone for him during the last day or two. When she said she had not, he moved about the shop talking almost foolishly and certainly feebly about pieces in it which

he had seen so often. Miss Timmins waited: it was coming. It came.

"I've picked up a piece of hard stone myself, Beulah darling—a nice piece," he said, and there was a note of triumph in his tone.

As a rule Miss Timmins ignored wholly sentences which began or ended with "Beulah darling," or had "Beulah darling" in the middle of them. But she did not wish to discourage him and this time she said: "Have you?"

"I've brought it along to show you, Beulah darling," and the note of triumph in his tone was louder.

With rather a fine gesture, he drew the first cloak-hook from his pocket and held it out to her on his open hand.

She looked at it calmly and said quietly in a matter-of-fact tone and with little interest: "Yes; I always thought it a nice piece."

He looked more than a little taken aback; his *coup* had fallen flat, indeed. He had expected her to show chagrin, even temper, and perhaps plenty of it, on learning that, in spite of her resolve to keep it from him, he had his own way about the cloak-hook.

Then she added in almost listless accents: "But it isn't as good as mine."

"Yours!" he exclaimed "But it is yours! At least it was!"

"I'm talking about my new one," she said, carelessly. "Of course, yours is by the same man and carved from the same piece of lapis.

But he got a more beautiful curve to the handle of mine."

He stared at her with incredulous eyes. She opened the drawer and took her cloak-hook from it and handed it to him. He almost snatched it from her and compared the two with eyes uncommonly wide open.

Then he looked at her. She smiled at him kindly, a quite tremendous smile.

His lips were parted and he blinked. Then he said softly: "You little—angel!"

CHAPTER IV

THE JADE SPIRIT GONG

“**W**HAT’S the matter?” said Miss Timmins.
“You’ve got your own way.”
“My own way,” said Lord Scredington bitterly.

“Well, that’s the cloak-hook you wanted,” said Miss Timmins.

“What I wanted was the best cloak-hook in Europe, and you’ve got it,” said Lord Scredington yet more bitterly.

“You can’t have everything,” said Miss Timmins sweetly.

“Where you’re concerned, I don’t get anything at all,” said Lord Scredington in the tone of one suffering from a very cruel injury.

“How can you say so?” said Miss Timmins indignantly. “I’ve just let you get that cloak-hook. I knew Mrs. MacArthur was getting it for you.”

“Rub it in—rub it in,” said Lord Scredington in dispirited accents; then he added with some vehemence: “Hang it all! I believe you’re the only girl of my acquaintance for whom I have any respect.”

The sentiment took Miss Timmins very much aback, but she said severely: "And a nice way you have of showing it."

"Oh, that?" he said carelessly. Then he added in a tone of firm protest: "Except when my love gets the better of me, I am always perfectly respectful. After all, I'm not stone, am I? I'm flesh and blood."

"And cheek," said Miss Timmins

His face cleared and he laughed. Miss Timmins was pleased with his laughing; some men would have suffered from a grouch for several hours. He let the subject drop and asked her what she had been doing during the last few days, and she said that she had been minding the shop. He said compassionately that he was afraid that she had a dull, hard life, and she protested that she had nothing of the kind. Then he asked what she had paid for the Worcester cup and saucer she had sold to Mrs. MacArthur for twelve guineas. She said that they were separate pieces she had found in different places, and had not cost her much. He suggested that they had cost her ninepence. She ignored the suggestion.

Of a sudden he struck himself on the chest with a violence that made her start: "I've got an idea—a happy idea!" he said. "You must make up to me for it."

"Make up to you for what?" said Miss Timmins.

"For doing me in the eye over the cloak-hook."

"I didn't do you in the eye!" said Miss Timmins indignantly. "I did exactly what you wanted."

"Never mind," he said. "You must make up to me for it all the same."

"What do you want me to do?" said Miss Timmins cautiously, and cautiously she edged as far back from the counter as the wall behind it would let her.

He had a way of suddenly springing upon her and kissing her by violence, if she was within reach and off her guard.

"It's now a quarter to four," he said. "The dancing at Thibault's begins at four; that gives you seven minutes to decorate yourself to your satisfaction, and in another seven minutes we can get there. Do come, an afternoon's dancing with you is the only thing in the world that could possibly make up to me for my horrible disappointment about the cloak-hook."

Miss Timmins hesitated, looking at him. He looked so eager that she should come and so anxious lest she should refuse, that her better judgment had no chance, though it positively shouted in her brain that it was all so silly, and nothing could ever come of it.

She said: "Thank you very much. I should like to."

"You *can* be nice when you like," he said gratefully.

In seven minutes she had changed into her prettiest frock and put on her prettiest hat and got her hair to her liking. She wished that Mrs. MacArthur's cheque had come a few days earlier so that she might be wearing the beautiful clothes she intended to buy with part of it. But even as it was, her mirror showed her an exceedingly satisfactory young person.

In seven minutes they were at Thibault's, and in another three she had abandoned herself wholly to

the delight of dancing with the best dancer she had ever known.

It was a delightful afternoon; Lord Scredington was more than respectful; he had the air of being charmed. The two hours passed far too quickly. When the band stopped its playing and departed, he ordered cocktails, and only when they had drunk them did he say:

"It's a pity to break the spell, Beulah. You don't mind me calling you Beulah, do you? Let's stay here and dine and dance again."

"Dine here?" she said quickly. "But how can I? I'm not in evening dress."

"No more am I," said Lord Scredington. "But it doesn't really matter till the theatre crowd comes in, and then it doesn't matter really."

Miss Timmins hesitated. She wanted to stay, and she did not want to stay; she had more than an inkling that it was dangerous. But she was too much under the spell of the place and the dancing, and most of all Lord Scredington, to refuse, and to a delightful afternoon they added a delightful evening. But when the people from the theatre came pouring in, and the place was growing crowded and losing the charm of intimacy, she would stay no longer.

At the door of the shop she thanked him for the delightful time he had given her, and then she said: "I really think I must let you have that other cloak-hook after all."

"You won't. I had the delightful time. Good-night," he said quickly and stepped back to the taxi.

When she came into the parlour, flushed and with

shining eyes, she found Tom Anderson and Mr. Kettleby with her father.

"Oh, there you are, Beulah. Where have you been?" said Mr. Timmins with truly paternal tactlessness.

"I've been dancing with Lord Scredington," said Miss Timmins in a tone of extreme satisfaction.

Tom Anderson frowned and Mr. Kettleby frowned, and Mr. Timmins said: "I do like that young man. He's always so cheerful."

Tom Anderson and Mr. Kettleby looked at Mr. Timmins as though they would like to express an unfavourable opinion of his intelligence.

Then Mr. Kettleby said in severe and virtuous accents: "He may be a very cheerful young man. But, if what I hear about him is true, he is a very bad character."

"Oh, he's young, and boys will be boys," said Mr. Timmins indulgently.

"When I was young, boys of his age were not in the habit of making constant appearances in the divorce court," said Mr. Kettleby, yet more severely.

"That must have been a great many years ago," said Miss Timmins coldly. "But I'm a little tired, so I'll wish you good-night and get off to bed."

She kissed her father and went. But though she was a little tired by so much dancing, she did not go to sleep quickly. The lilt of the music was still in her ears, the brightness of Thibault's still in her eyes, and the blue eyes of Lord Scredington were dancing in that brightness and his face was vivid in her mind.

She awoke next morning very much at peace with

the world, but presently relapsed to a severe frame of mind. The afternoon and evening had been delightful; but it would not do. Lord Scredington was not serious; he could not be serious. Seriousness was not in him, and if it had been, there was no chance in the world that he would ever feel seriously about her. She was a pretty girl—she did not blink the fact—and he was used to amusing himself with pretty girls. The way he had looked at her and the pretty things he had said to her meant nothing serious; she had been foolish to be so much impressed by them as she had been the night before. She ought to have taken the delightful afternoon and evening he gave her without feeling about him as she felt when she came home.

She was inclined to resent his having made her feel like that. Deliberately, she hardened her heart against him. He gave it time to grow quite hard, for he did not come to the shop to inquire whether she had found any piece of hard stone for him for four days. Consequently, when he did come, she was cold with him. He invited her to dance at Thibault's that afternoon, but he could not persuade her to do so.

When he found that he could not move her, he said mournfully: "One of these days, Beulah darling, you will regret having spurned a loving heart."

He had assumed such a dispirited air and was drooping so weakly, that he had her quite off her guard. Then he made a sudden spring and grabbed both her arms just below the shoulder and bent and kissed her three times before he loosed her. Miss

Timmins was furious; she told him quite frankly what she thought of his manners and disposition.

He said: "I can't help it. You know I can't help it, Beulah darling," and went away unrepentant.

She was angry for most of the evening; his cheek was really outrageous. She even awoke angry next morning, and it was not till after she had set out to hunt through the junk shops that her mind again became equal. Later, Fortune was really kind.

It needed the eyes of Miss Timmins—eyes trained almost from babyhood to peruse curious and beautiful things—to see the disk. Not more than three inches of it was in sight; the rest of it was hidden by a pile of gramophone records which had been set on it. That three inches was of sombre colour. The dirt of years—black dirt, brown dirt, grey dirt, yellow dirt—had formed a blackish-brownish-yellowish-greyish film on it; and it was a thick film. Only eyes as keen as little Miss Timmins's could have seen the faint pattern under that film. The disk, whatever it might be, whatever it might be made of, was carved.

Miss Timmins entered the shop with all a hunter's excitement at the sight of a strange beast, and at the sound of her entrance a large, round, odoriferous, slatternly woman, with a red nose and a watery eye, came from behind the shop. At the sight of Miss Timmins's pretty face she seemed to bristle slightly, like a cat suddenly confronted by a strange cat.

"What's that round thing under the pile of gramophone records?" said Miss Timmins, pointing to the protruding edge of the disk.

Displaying her contempt for female attractiveness

by an aloof and *dégagé* air, the woman shoved the gramophone records aside and raised the disk with a hand covered with as sombre a film. Miss Timmins saw that part of the disk was pierced—carved *à jour* is the technical phrase—and the carving looked to her to be Oriental.

The woman moistened a dirty thumb with a grey tongue, rubbed away a little of the film of dirt on the disk and disclosed a dirty-grey, patterned surface.

Then, in instructive, patronising, but faintly hostile accents, she said: "That's hallybaster, that is."

"Oh?" said Miss Timmins, in the tone of one receiving information respectfully.

"There's a lot of collectors of hallybaster nowadays, and it's getting dearer and dearer every day—most hexpensive it's gettin'," said the woman.

Miss Timmins took the disk from her and examined it. Neither her eyes nor her fingers could tell her of what it was composed. Only the texture of caked dirt presented itself to them. But the pierced part of it looked like a dragon's head, and it was heavy—stone or glass.

"I'm afraid it would be too expensive for me, if it's alabaster," said Miss Timmins, setting it down on the counter. Then she added wistfully: "Though I do love uncommon things."

The woman's eyes brightened at the prospect of a sale; and she drew the back of her dirty hand across her lips with a gesture that conveyed the odd suggestion that her thought had flown to a half-quartern of gin. She took up the disk from the counter and examined it with the air of an expert.

"Hallybaster it is," she said. "An' I couldn't take less than seven bob for it."

Miss Timmins knew the kind of woman too well to accept the offer out of hand. To do so would have aroused the woman's suspicion that the disk might be a really valuable object of art and she would ask a great deal more for it or refuse to sell it at all. Therefore, she suggested that she should pay four shillings for it. At the end of the protracted negotiations which followed, she acquired it for five and sixpence. The woman wrapped it up, clumsily, in a dirty piece of newspaper and as she took the five and sixpence from Miss Timmins, she passed the back of her hand across her lips in the same gin-suggesting gesture.

Miss Timmins came out of the shop in a pleased excitement; she might have done a very good morning's work. It was past twelve, and she walked briskly home.

Mr. Timmins was sitting behind the counter, reading as usual the literature of his subject. He raised his dim blue eyes from the pamphlet and slowly drank in the information that it was his daughter who had entered the shop.

"Lord Scredington came in again about two hours ago. He said that he felt in his bones that after he went yesterday you had found a cloak-hook for him," he said in his gentle voice. "He talked to me for quite a long time, quite seriously for once, and he said that you were the most convincing piece of evidence he had ever come across that we Brits were descended from the lost tribes of Israel." He paused to peer at

her earnestly through his horn-rimmed spectacles and added: "But he could not make it quite clear to me what he meant—how you were such a piece of convincing evidence."

"He probably didn't know himself," said Miss Timmins huffily, for she thought it improbable that Lord Scredington meant his discovery to be taken as a compliment.

"Oh, I think he meant it, but he was not quite clear about it in his mind," said Mr. Timmins. "And before he went he said he was disappointed not to find you in, and if you did come across a nice piece of hard stone, you were to be sure to take it round to his flat."

Miss Timmins flushed. She told herself that it was just like the young nobleman's cheek, for he knew that nothing would induce her to take anything round to his flat. She flushed and then she scowled. As she had not been at hand to tease, he had used her innocent father as his teasing mouthpiece.

She did not explain this to her father. She went into the kitchen and began to fry the chops for their dinner, eager as she was to discover what her find was. They talked little at the meal; Mr. Timmins was pondering the facts set forth in the pamphlet he had been reading; Miss Timmins was pondering many things, but chiefly Lord Scredington and his cheek.

After dinner, still curbing her eagerness, she washed up. Then she did get to work on the disk, with hot water and soap and a nail-brush. Naturally she began on that part of the disk which was carved *à jour*. The dirt was loth to leave it; but at the end

of five minutes' scrubbing she had cleaned three inches of it to find, to her joy, that it was composed of milky jade. She knew now what she had found—one of those spirit gongs which the Chinese priests strike in their temples, to call up spirits, or rather, to be exact, devils. She had been lucky, indeed! She brushed away; twice she had to change the blackened water; the dirt of years put up a most gallant fight. At last the disk was clean.

It was three-sixteenths of an inch thick and about seven inches broad. On one side were a few little red flecks, where, during the lapse of centuries, the iron in the stone had oxidised. The other side was fleckless. It was a lovely piece, a dragon with a fish's tail, the King of the Dragons. In Japan he has the body of a carp; in China, according to the experts, the body of a sturgeon. The body was curved so that the head and tail met.

The carving, in low relief, was the quiet carving of a good period. Miss Timmins liked it exceedingly: as she phrased it to herself, there were no squiggles about it. For an inch below the head the body was adorned with a kind of collar of conventionalised scales, below the spines in the back it was adorned for two inches with a charming pattern of starry blossoms. The lines of the openwork head and tail were admirable. The hole in the centre was of the right size—half the breadth of the body encircling it. From the quietness of the carving and the red flecks in the stone she judged it to be fairly old—sixteenth-century, or perhaps even late fifteenth.

Triumphantly she showed it to her father. Mr.

Timmins studied it with a faint air of disapproval and said doubtfully: "I've no doubt it is a good piece. But somehow it doesn't appeal to me. I never *can* 'see' these Chinese things."

"It *is* a good piece," said Miss Timmins, stroking it fondly.

CHAPTER V

THE CHINESE CUSTOMER

SHE went upstairs and put on her prettiest frock and hat. Then she put the disk in the green Russia leather attaché case, walked briskly to the Museum, asked to see Mr. Webster, the expert in jade.

Mr. Webster was busy ; but he knew Miss Timmins and told his clerk to admit her. Quite unconsciously, experts in objects of art are kinder to pretty girls than they are to those so often richly bearded collectors and dealers who consult them. Quite unconsciously, he smiled upon Miss Timmins as he had never smiled on a bearded collector. She took the spirit-gong from the attaché case, unwrapped it, and handed it to him, saying that she had come to ask him if he could tell her the date of it. He took it from her rather hastily, and as he examined it, his eyes began to shine with an uncommon brightness and he plucked nervously at his neat grey beard.

Then he said in reverent accents : " That's the finest spirit-gong I ever saw. The carving is delightful—of a really good period—middle sixteenth-century at the latest, or I'm a Dutchman."

"That was what I thought," said Miss Timmins, pleased to have been right.

He pointed out to her, with enthusiasm, those various beauties she had already seen for herself. She thanked him.

Then, not guilelessly, she said: "I thought I would bring it round to you first, in case the Museum would like to buy it."

Mr. Webster's face clouded; again he plucked at his beard; he said grumpily: "Of course the Museum would like to buy it! But it hasn't got the money. If I were to ask for a hundred pounds to buy a jade spirit-gong, they'd think I was mad."

"It is a pity," said Miss Timmins, with difficulty keeping her surprise and exultation out of her voice.

She had not dreamt that the disk was worth anything like a hundred pounds.

"It's a shame," said Mr. Webster in a tone of warm indignation. "And the money they've spent on second-rate European stuff! Mostly in days gone by, though."

Miss Timmins was sympathetic. She deplored the taste for the trivial objects of the West. Then she thanked him warmly for the information he had given her and walked home on very light feet—a hundred pounds for the gong, plus at least twenty-five pounds of the sixty guineas, would indeed put the business on a splendid footing. She would be able to launch out almost freely in buying better pieces, at sales and from dealers, to be sold at a greater profit. She had visions of a shop in a street along which collectors walked frequently.

She turned to the consideration of how to get that £100, or more. If the gong was worth £100 to the Museum, it was worth more to the collector. Lord Scredington was the obvious person to sell it to. If it took his fancy, he would pay £120 for it without a murmur. It would take his fancy; she knew his taste. But his cheek in kissing her and the cheeky message he had sent by her father were still rankling in her mind; and her violent desire to score off that cheerful and wicked young nobleman was stronger than usual. Then a happy thought came to her. His uncle, Sir Charles Goulceby, was as ardent a collector as Lord Scredington. Why should she not pit them against one another? Sir Charles was much richer than his nephew and, though a man of quite uncommon meanness, quite as obstinate when it came to acquiring a work of art on which he had set his fancy.

When she reached home she wrote two postcards. They ran:

I shall have a very fine milky jade spirit-gong here at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning.

Yours faithfully,

BEULAH TIMMINS.

She went out at once and posted them. They would reach their destination that evening within a few minutes of one another, since Sir Charles Goulceby was Lord Scredington's near neighbour in Mayfair. Bar accident, the two of them should arrive at the shop at eleven next morning, thirsting for a jade spirit-gong, together.

There was a happy, but wicked, smile on her face as she turned to go home. She disliked Sir Charles Goulceby very much more than she disliked Lord Scredington. He was mean: a hard bargainer, who would never give a fair price if he could help it. Nowadays, she always asked him nearly double what she intended to take for a piece. She was inclined to hope that Lord Scredington would outbid him.

On her return to the shop she polished the spirit-gong with a wash-leather for a long time. Then she set it in the window on a square of black velvet. It was not at all likely that a collector who would give a hundred and twenty pounds for a piece of jade would find his way into Devonshire Street. But Miss Timmins, like all thoughtful persons who traffic in beautiful things, was an almost fervent believer in luck, and she was not given to missing chances. No wealthy collector did find his way into Devonshire Street that afternoon, and when she shut up the shop for the night, she carried the precious gong up to her bedroom and locked it in a drawer.

When she came down next morning to let in the charwoman, she brought it with her and again put it in the window. It did not bring a wealthy collector into the shop, but at five minutes to nine it brought in a young Chinaman. He looked a well-to-do young Chinaman, for he was dressed in quiet, good English clothes, cut by a good tailor. He asked her, in very good English and with a cultivated intonation, if he might look at the round piece of jade in the window. She took it from the window and handed it to him.

His face was expressionless; there had been no

note of excitement in his voice when he asked to see the gong. But as he took it from her, her keen eyes noticed that his fingers were trembling a little.

He examined the gong carefully; then he drew his pocket-book from his pocket. From it he took a folded square of rice-paper and spread it flat on the glass case on the counter. Miss Timmins saw on it a drawing of the gong. He laid the gong on it. The drawing was of exactly the same size as the gong.

"It is it. There is no doubt," he said gravely. "What is the price of it?"

Miss Timmins hesitated; then she said: "A hundred and fifty guineas."

He looked at her and she perceived that the veil of Oriental impassivity was no longer drawn across his eyes. They were keen and shining, and fixed on her face in a piercing gaze.

"It is a great deal of money, but not too much," he said gravely. "Certainly, not too much. But I am a student at your University," he said, waving his hand towards the north. "And I have not so much money at the moment. Yet I *must* have this piece of jade."

He hesitated, looking at Miss Timmins. She liked him. For all the rather flat nose and up-slanting eyes, it was a good face, kind and intelligent, and the forehead was very good indeed.

"No; I haven't the money to-day. But I could get it——" he paused to make the calculation—"thirteen days from to-day. My grandfather, who would cable it, lives five days from the nearest telegraph station. Six days for the cable to reach him——"

six days for his cable to reach the telegraph office—and to-day and another day. Yes; in thirteen days from to-day, and, of course, you will keep the gong till I bring you the money."

"I'm expecting two customers at eleven and one of them is sure to buy it," said Miss Timmins reluctantly, for she would have liked to accept the young man's proposal.

"At eleven?" he said sharply and paused, pondering. Then he said: "If you will wait thirteen days I will give you two hundred pounds for it. And I will bring fifty pounds of the two hundred as a deposit, before eleven o'clock."

Two hundred pounds. Miss Timmins gasped faintly and her heart fairly leapt in her. This was beyond the dreams of avarice!

The young Chinaman looked at her with anxious, rather imploring eyes; Miss Timmins looked at him. She liked the look of him; she told herself that he was a nice boy. He could not have been more than five years older than she was. She wished strongly to oblige him. Besides, two hundred pounds! And to score off Lord Scredington and Sir Charles Goulceby too! Moreover they were unlikely, either of them, to pay as much as that for it.

"Very well," she said. "If you bring me the fifty pounds by eleven o'clock, I will keep the gong and wait till the fourteenth day for the rest of the money. But I can't wait later than eleven."

"Thank you," he said in a tone of immense relief, and smiled at her—such a nice smile, Miss Timmins thought.

He put the drawing back in his book and hurried out of the shop. She put the gong on its square of black velvet, into the glass case on the counter, after taking the small objects of art out of the case and putting them into a drawer. She wished to display the gong in such a way as to give it its full value.

At a quarter to eleven the young Chinaman re-entered the shop briskly, smiling happily. He gave Miss Timmins fifty pounds in notes and received her receipt for them.

"It is the most beautiful spirit-gong I ever saw. I don't wonder you want it so badly," she said, smiling at him.

She was uncommonly pleased that she had accepted his proposal.

"Ah, you know what it is, do you?" he said, smiling at her. Then he added, gravely: "But it is more than beautiful. My family consider it holy. One of our ancestors gave it to a temple four hundred years ago. Forty years ago it was stolen. It was very powerful—at least the priests of the temple believed it very powerful. They did not even catch the thief, though they hunted for him for months. Later, they learnt that he had sold it to an Englishman in Canton, a traveller who had gone back to England. Ever since then, whenever one of my family has been in England, he has looked for the gong. None of them ever came to England without the drawing, which is exactly drawn, in case there should be another gong like this one, but larger or smaller, and he should make a mistake. My family believes that the ancestor who gave the gong to the temple is angry with us because

we do not recover it—they are very simple people—and they will be greatly pleased to restore it. But whether it will still help the priests with the spirits, I do not know.” He shrugged his shoulders, paused, and then added: “But it would be better not to talk about it. There are countrymen of mine in London who would want the gong very much indeed. And there are other people, Europeans, who would want it too. The gong is well known. Many people believe that it has great powers.”

“They wouldn’t get it off *me*,” said Miss Timmins, quickly and firmly. “I’ve sold it to *you*, and I shouldn’t dream of letting anyone else have it.”

“If they could not buy it off you, they would try to steal it. Those countrymen of mine are not—er—quite nice. And those Europeans are dangerous people,” he said gravely. “So it is good to be careful and talk not about it.”

He gave her his name, Yu Chi Ting, and the address of his rooms, lower down the street, and bade her good morning.

As he went out of the shop, Miss Timmins smiled happily; she had not only sold the gong for an undreamed-of sum, she had also scored off both Lord Scredington and Sir Charles Goulceby. Her smile grew rather vengeful as she waited for them.

They were not punctual. It was a quarter past eleven when Lord Scredington’s car drew up to the kerb, and he came briskly into the shop, looking his best in the fresh morning and with that air of astonishing distinction.

Miss Timmins thought that his eyes were nearly as

blue as her own that morning, and tried not to find him attractive after his recent cheek. She failed.

Then he spoilt the good impression and became wholly unattractive to her by beginning: "Good morning, Beulah darling. I've nearly killed a policeman, a full-sized policeman. I had to. I saw Uncle Charles's car in Hart Street and guessed you'd written to him about the gong. You nearly got me hanged—out of sheer malice, you little horror. For you know he wouldn't pay you a decent price for it. Where is it?"

"Sir Charles is a good customer," said Miss Timmins coldly and untruthfully, and she made no move to show him the gong.

"I nearly killed him too," said Lord Scredington with a marked increase of his cheerfulness. "But that wouldn't have mattered. It would have come under the Extermination of Vermin Act."

"It's very wrong to speak like that about your uncle," said Miss Timmins severely.

"Is it my fault that he's my uncle?" he cried indignantly. "I didn't choose him! You know I didn't! You know quite well that if he'd been the only uncle left in the world, I wouldn't have chosen him! I'd rather have gone without an uncle altogether!"

On his words Sir Charles Goulceby entered the shop, a tall, thin man of sixty-five, with the Scredington nose, but with a small, thin-lipped, mean mouth, and eyes of a dull, pale blue. His face was flushed and his eyes were sparkling.

"You were within an ace of breaking my neck,

you young ruffian!" he cried furiously. "I'll inform the police and have your licence cancelled, I will! The very moment I've bought what I came for!"

"Go away now, and don't talk such outrageous nonsense!" said Lord Scredington impenitently. "Everyone knows that I am one of the most careful drivers in London. Go away! I've come to look at a piece of jade, and you're disturbing me."

"I'll disturb you! I'll get your licence suspended for a year!" said Sir Charles loudly. Then the collector's passion got the better of his righteous wrath, and he added in quieter accents: "So have I. Where is the spirit-gong, Miss Timmins?"

Miss Timmins took the gong from the glass case and laid it on the top of it on the square of black velvet, which gave it its full value.

They bent over it, examining it, studying it, handling it in turn.

"It isn't a spirit-gong. It's a *pi*," said Sir Charles. Then he added in a tone by no means as indifferent as he tried to make it: "But it isn't a bad piece. I'll give you thirty pounds for it."

"You're wrong when you say it isn't a spirit-gong, but you're right when you say it isn't a bad piece. In fact, it's the most interesting, though not the most elaborate, gong you ever set eyes on, or I either. I'll give you sixty pounds for it, Miss Timmins," said Lord Scredington.

"Seventy!" snapped Sir Charles, and then he groaned sharply at the size of the bid.

"Let's say a hundred," said Lord Scredington suavely. "A hundred, Miss Timmins."

Miss Timmins's time had come. With extraordinary sweetness she said: "It is a spirit-gong. It has been used as a spirit-gong in a temple. But I'm afraid it isn't for sale any longer. I've just sold it."

"You've sold it!" they exclaimed with one voice, and a surprised and indignant voice it was, and they both glared at her.

"Yes," said Miss Timmins even more sweetly. "I wrote to you eleven o'clock, and now it's nearly twenty past. I sold it before you came—for two hundred pounds."

"But how can it be sold? You've got it here," said Sir Charles, in incredulous accents. "No one would leave a piece like this when he'd bought it—no one in the world."

"The customer left a deposit on it," said Miss Timmins coldly.

Lord Scredington studied the gong once more with a very mournful air; then he said mournfully: "Well, that's that. I'd have given you more for it."

Sir Charles, who had of a sudden appeared to be choking, broke out: "But it's monstrous! Monstrous! You've brought me all this way for nothing!"

"Not for nothing, uncle. You've seen *me*," said Lord Scredington with honied sweetness.

Sir Charles glared at him. Lord Scredington heaved a sigh that was almost a groan. Then he said, with tears in his voice: "Good morning, Miss Timmins. Heaven forgive you! I can bear it no longer. I must go! I must be alone with my bleeding heart."

He went out of the shop, drooping.

"I'm sorry, Sir Charles," said Miss Timmins in

soothing accents. "But I couldn't miss a chance like that. I knew you wouldn't want to give two hundred pounds for the gong."

"A monstrous price! Ridiculous!" said Sir Charles with immense bitterness.

Then his earlier grievance came keenly on him, and gazing through the window at his impertinent nephew, who had lost his droop and was sitting quite upright, smiling cheerfully, in the driver's seat of his car, he added fiercely: "That young man's a ruffian, a perfect ruffian! He's a throwback! There's a strong strain of Viking blood in the Goulcebys. It's come out in him—all of it."

This was news to Miss Timmins. But she had heard her father speak of the Vikings, also descendants of the lost tribes of Israel. She looked through the window with a new interest at Lord Scredington, now moving off in his car, and said thoughtfully:

"Then, I suppose they were like cave-men?"

"Like gorillas!" snapped Sir Charles, and he stalked out of the shop.

CHAPTER VI

THE VAMPIRE

MISS TIMMINS gazed after the receding figure of Sir Charles Goulceby as he stamped across the pavement to his car, and her so kissable lips were wreathed with a pensive, pleased, and mischievous grin.

Then she took the gong upstairs and locked it in the bottom drawer of her chest of drawers and thought no more about it.

Unfortunately, Sir Charles did think about it, and he thought about it in quite a wrong place. He was dining at the French Embassy that night, and the wines were so admirable that he drank rather more of each than a man of his years could be expected to carry with discretion. The guests were all men, and after dinner, as they sat round the table smoking, the spirit of Sir Charles was overwhelmed by a deep sorrowfulness; the memory of his loss that morning came upon him; in bitter accents he told the party, which was not greatly interested in his woes, how narrowly he had missed the finest jade spirit-gong he had ever seen. Sorrowfully, he described the gong. He was accorded a cursory sympathy.

Then, when they moved into the Ambassador's smoking room, a polished and agreeable young Jugo-Slav from the Jugo-Slav Embassy, a young man with slate-coloured, almond-shaped eyes, set too close together on either side of a thin, high, hooked nose, in a clear-skinned, pale face on which the thick line of eye-brows, that met above that thin nose, stood out very black, devoted himself to Sir Charles with an air of sympathetic and respectful interest. He talked at length and with understanding about Chinese art in general and then again raised the subject of the jade gong, heard from Sir Charles the exact circumstances of his failure to get it, that the purchaser had paid a deposit on it, and then drew from him an exact description of it. The young man talked lightly enough, and a most agreeable smile, which never rose as high as his eyes, kept wreathing his lips.

But when Sir Charles said that below the dragon's tail was a pattern of starry blossoms, the young man said sharply: "Yes, yes—starry blossoms! That is the one! Certainly! Yes, yes!"

"You know the piece?" said Sir Charles, surprised that such knowledge should have spread to the nations of the Balkans.

The young man hesitated; then he said: "Yes. I think so. It is in the tradition—the occult tradition—immensely in it."

"Oh, the occult!" said Sir Charles contemptuously, and he laughed a sneering laugh, for of a sudden he no longer felt sorrowful, but rather bellicose.

For a breath the smiling mask, which hid the young

man, broke in a fierce frown which turned him suddenly sinister ; and running his finger in an odd gesture, along the thick black line of his eyebrows, he said in a suddenly harsh, grating voice : " But things *can* be done! Immense things! "

Sir Charles stared at him, suddenly sobered for the moment. It was for all the world as if a flash of lightning had revealed an abyss and he was near the edge of it. Then the young man was smiling again with an almost oppressive agreeableness, and asking where the shop in which he had found the spirit-gong was.

Sir Charles told him and shambled away from him to the other end of the room and later asked his host who the agreeable young man was.

" Oh, that's Baron Gageschi," said the Ambassador. " He's a Moldo-Wallachian, attached to the Jugo-Slav embassy. His Balkan friends, and some of his English friends, call him ' The Vampire.' The way his eyebrows meet, you know."

Sir Charles did not know.

" An uncomfortable young man," he said.

At ten o'clock the next morning the agreeable young Moldo-Wallachian entered the shop to find Miss Timmins polishing an ivory netsuke with sweet oil of almonds. He smiled upon her a most agreeable smile and ungratefully she took a dislike to him at once.

" A gentleman I met at dinner last night told me that you have a spirit-gong, a milky jade spirit-gong, a dragon with a fish's tail," he said, and again he smiled that agreeable smile. " Might I see it? "

The second agreeable smile was too much for Miss Timmins and she answered in almost ungracious accents: "I'm afraid you can't. It's sold."

"Yes. I know that it is sold; but I gathered that you still had it. And I should like to see it very much, indeed," said the young Moldo-Wallachian, and he smiled a third agreeable smile.

She shook her head and said firmly: "No. I'm afraid I can't show it to you. It's sold."

"But I want to see it very much. It will be worth your while," he said, and smiled a fourth agreeable smile.

It was too much, and with a tartness foreign to her nature, except when it was in contact with Lord Scredington, Miss Timmins said: "Really, you know, I can't be bothered about the thing—I've sold it."

He did not smile a fifth time; his lips were set in a thin line; in his unsmiling face his eyes were hard. But his voice was soft and cajoling as he said: "But it is still in your possession, and I will give you more for it—much more. Yes, yes!"

"I got a very good price for it, thank you," said Miss Timmins coldly.

"Whatever the price was, I will give you two hundred pounds more," he said.

Miss Timmins was taken aback and saddened—four hundred pounds when she was only getting two hundred! But there was nothing to be done; a sale was a sale.

"Why do you want it so badly? You're not a Chinaman," she said, rather sharply, and her eyes were sparkling brightly.

"Oh? A Chinaman?" he said slowly in a tone of enlightenment. Then he added: "So a Chinaman has bought it, has he? Yes, yes."

Miss Timmins was yet more annoyed, and with herself as well as with the agreeable, smiling customer; the gong was now the Chinaman's business; she ought not to have talked about it. He had warned her against doing so, and seriously.

"Well, I'm afraid I can't help you; the gong is sold," she said in as indifferent a tone as she could command, but with a note of finality in it.

The young man beat a nervous tattoo with his long finger-nails on the glass of the case, staring at her with hard, unblinking eyes; then he said, again in that soft, cajoling voice: "I'll give you five hundred pounds for it—cash."

"I can't take it. A sale is a sale," said Miss Timmins firmly, though she could not keep a note of regret quite out of her voice.

He scowled at her, still staring hard, a very ugly scowl; and she had very much the same impression as Sir Charles had had, the impression of looking into depths. Then he smiled a last agreeable smile and laid a visiting card on the counter.

"You will change your mind—very likely," he said hopefully. "When you do, telegraph or write to me at once to this address."

"I shan't change my mind!" said Miss Timmins with considerable heat.

"Then you'll be a little fool," he said quietly, and walked quietly out of the shop.

He left Miss Timmins very angry, indeed, not only

with him, but also with herself—for having talked after the young Chinaman's warning. She was even a little frightened: Baron Gageschi had for a while looked so sinister. She picked up the visiting card gingerly, as she might have picked up a worm, and on it she read:

Baron Gageschi

The Jugo-Slav Embassy,
Hanover Square, W.1.

She was troubled about the matter for the next thirty-six hours; it kept recurring. Then it passed out of her mind.

Three mornings later, she was badly startled to find that the shop had been burgled. The drawers in the counter and the two cabinets had been forced open and ransacked. It was annoying, but not serious, for, since she had managed the shop, they had been well insured against burglary as well as fire, so that whatever had been stolen, she would suffer no actual loss of money, but only the loss of possible profits. She went carefully through the ransacked drawers and cabinets and found to her surprise that the burglar had gone away empty-handed. Her surprise did not last long; it flashed on her that he had been hunting for the jade spirit-gong.

She did not tell her father what had happened. Why worry him? After breakfast she fetched a locksmith, and Mr. Timmins was reading peacefully in the parlour while that locksmith replaced the broken locks, and did not even learn that they had been broken. But Miss Timmins went about her work of dusting and polishing objects of art with a troubled face.

In the middle of the morning Lord Scredington came into the shop to inquire if she had found any hard stone for him. He did not ruffle her sensibilities by calling her either "Baby" or "Beulah, darling," but he had assumed a morose and injured air as befitted a man who had been robbed of a jade spirit-gong. But that soon wore off, because Miss Timmins, with an air of penitence wholly feigned, made herself much nicer than usual to him, and he became by degrees his pleasant and friendly self. Then it seemed to him that she was rather absent-minded and he asked her what was the matter.

An impulse urged her to tell him her trouble. He might, as his uncle so bitterly asserted, be a throwback to the Vikings; but he did look a man who could be a useful helper in an awkward situation, and this situation was rather more than awkward. Therefore, she told him the whole story of the buying of the spirit-gong by the young Chinaman and of his earnest warning to her not to talk about it, and of the coming of Baron Gageschi and his offer of five hundred pounds for it, and the way in which he had pressed that offer.

"He called you a little fool and threatened you, did he?" said Lord Scredington indignantly, and his

eyes sparkled angrily. "What I will do to Baron Gageschi is wring his neck!"

"You won't do anything so silly!" she said tartly, but with admirable common-sense. "You'll only get into the papers again, and you've been in the papers quite often enough."

"So you know I've been in the papers, do you?" said Lord Scredington in a rather grieved tone. "It's astonishing how these things get about."

"There are always so many columns when you get into the papers," said Miss Timmins simply.

"Columns which you have no business to read," said Lord Scredington with cold severity. Then he added earnestly: "You don't understand, of course. When I take up politics seriously and attend the House of Lords regularly, it will be a tremendous advertisement, and my eloquent words will carry so much more weight."

"I don't think they will," said Miss Timmins, doubtfully. "But Baron Gageschi doesn't really matter—at least, what he said then doesn't matter. But the thing is that when I came down this morning I found that the shop had been burgled, but nothing had been taken. So the burglar must have been after the spirit-gong."

"The deuce he was!" he said gravely, frowning. "I don't like the look of this—I don't like the look of it at all. I know Gageschi a little, and he's a queer beggar. He's very thick with all those people who go in for the occult. I don't know how it is, but there are so many of them nowadays that you can't go into a drawing-room or ball-room without stepping on two

or three. They call him 'The Vampire,' and there are some devilish queer stories going round about the occult gang he chiefly mixes with—devil worship and that kind of thing. I shouldn't wonder if that's what he wants the spirit-gong for."

"That is what he wants it for," said Miss Timmins quickly. "The young Chinaman who bought it said that it had been in a temple over three hundred years, and his people believed it to be very powerful. Baron Gageschi must have known about it; the young Chinaman said that Europeans knew about it as well as some Chinese in London. And they call up devils with these spirit-gongs, or try to."

"I certainly do not like it," said Lord Scredington, yet more gravely and frowning more deeply. "Those Balkanese don't stick at much, and those occult people are mostly mad. I've seen Gageschi himself look as mad as a hatter about nothing at all."

"So did I," Miss Timmins broke in. "And he looked frightfully dangerous too."

"Of course, a mad Moldo-Wallachian must be one of the most dangerous beasts there is," said Lord Scredington.

"I can't think how he came to know that the spirit-gong had been found and that it was still here," said Miss Timmins, knitting her brow with puzzled air.

"It wasn't me," said Lord Scredington quickly. "As it happens, I haven't talked about it to anyone. I should say it was that old blighter, Uncle Charles. He was in the diplomatic service for a donkey's years, and he is always very thick with ambassadors and ministers. I expect he not only told Gageschi all

about the spirit-gong, but also that your customer had only paid a deposit on it. It's the kind of silly thing he would do."

"Someone must have," said Miss Timmins with a worried air. "And the worst of it is, the Chinaman isn't bringing the rest of the money for ten days."

"The deuce he isn't!" cried Lord Scredington in a tone of dismay. Then his face brightened and he struck himself violently on the chest and added: "I've got an idea—the happiest idea! I'll come and stay with you till the Chinaman brings the money and takes the infernal thing away."

"You won't!" said Miss Timmins with astonishing quickness; then she bethought herself that it was no way to accept what might be meant as a kindly offer, and added graciously: "It's very nice of you, but there's nowhere for you to sleep."

"I'll sleep in the shop—on the counter. I insist on it," he said with cheerful determination.

Miss Timmins shook her head and said in rather dolorous accents: "I certainly am afraid of their coming again, for there's only Daddy and I in the house, and I can't see how we could stop them getting it."

"But I've told you the only thing to do," he said.

"But you'd be worse than a burglary," said Miss Timmins with manifest sincerity.

"Thank you—thank you so much," he said with so many tears in his voice and with such an air of dejection that, though she doubted very much their sincerity, she was forced to be apologetic and soothing.

It was too late; he refused to be comforted and

presently he went away, drooping miserably till he was outside the shop. In the afternoon he returned, to her surprise, carrying a small parcel and to all seeming in good spirits again. He shook hands with her as warmly as if he had not seen her for several months, and unwrapped the parcel, disclosing a small box.

"I've brought you a little thing called a gat. Do you know how to use a gat?"

He opened the box and displayed a small automatic pistol.

Miss Timmins looked at it with the greatest disfavour and said: "No, I don't! And I don't want to."

"But you'll have to. It's the only possible thing to do if you don't let me stay here and sleep on the counter. Put on your hat and coat and we'll go along to a shooting gallery at once."

Miss Timmins refused firmly to put on her hat and coat. But, besides being a throwback to the Vikings, Lord Seredington had in him the makings of a deadly propagandist. The cause was a good one; he found so many reasons why Miss Timmins should learn to use a gat, and plied her with them with such a persuasive vehemence that in the end he swept her off her feet. She put on her hat and coat; also she put on her prettiest frock. She could not be seen with him in any other.

They spent an hour at the shooting gallery, and as she handled the gat, her distaste for it wore off and she grew immensely interested in trying to hit the centre of the target. At the end of the hour she

was hitting it very near its centre with a pleasing frequency.

She had not realised that being taught to use a gat by a throwback to the Vikings meant being taken possession of for the rest of the day, though she had realised clearly, indeed, that if ever she gave Lord Scredington an inch he would take a quarter of a mile, or try to. But later, to her surprise, she found herself dining at Thibault's and then in a box at a revue. She was glad that she had stopped to change into her prettiest frock. With the greatest reluctance she found herself enjoying herself immensely—not once did he ruffle her sensibilities; he was the perfect, thoughtful host. Once more she realised that when he was nice, he was very, very nice. Later again, she found herself supping at the Gargoyle Club and dancing with him. It was past two o'clock when he brought her back home, and even at that hour and after that delightful evening he did nothing to ruffle her sensibilities; he did not even try to kiss her when he said good-night; not that—well, not that. Miss Timmins was a trifle bemused.

The next morning she remembered that she had half promised Tom Anderson to go to the pictures with him the night before. She learnt from her father that Tom Anderson had not forgotten it, but had called for her and had appeared annoyed when he learnt that she had gone out with Lord Scredington. He had joined Mr. Timmins and Mr. Kettleby in the parlour and had been very unpleasant to Mr. Kettleby, so that suave Brit had left early. Then Tom had spoken seriously to Mr. Timmins about the way he

allowed her to go gadding about and had pointed out that she was not yet of age and her own mistress. Tom appeared to be getting restive.

Miss Timmins was not wholly displeased by Tom's behaviour; she could but feel it was a tribute. But she was exceedingly annoyed by his statements about her age. What, after all, were years? She knew, they all knew, that she could take care of herself a great deal better than most girls of twenty-five. She was still annoyed when Tom came round in the evening to complain that she had not kept her engagement with him. Naturally, the half-promise at once became to her no promise at all, and she did her best to make clear to him that there had been no promise at all. He took a different view of the matter. Then she fell upon him for having said that her father ought to take more care of her, when she was quite able to take care of herself.

"You aren't. No girl is—especially when she is with a young feller like Lord Scredington—one of those lady-killers," said Tom firmly, but with rather a sneering inflection in his tone.

"I am perfectly safe with Lord Scredington," said Miss Timmins coldly.

"That's what you all think," said Tom, rather scornfully. "And then the day comes, sooner or later, when you all go to pieces and let yourselves down. You know you let him kiss you."

"I *never* let him kiss me!" said Miss Timmins, with vehement indignation.

"But he does kiss you," said Tom with a knowing air.

"I never let him, and if he did it wouldn't be any business of yours," said Miss Timmins with no less indignation.

"I bet you've never smacked his face when he has kissed you," said Tom coldly, with the same knowing air.

Miss Timmins paused before replying; she looked at Tom with an air of one who has received sudden enlightenment; then she said in thoughtful accents: "I never thought of it."

Tom was silent for a few seconds; then he said rather plaintively: "You might think of a fellow's feelings—sometimes."

"There's nothing to think of your feelings about," protested Miss Timmins.

Tom hesitated again; then he said: "Well, what about to-night?" Will you come to Stoll's to-night?"

"I had such a late night last night," said Miss Timmins unkindly; then, more generously, she added: "But if you like to come round, I'll see what I'm feeling like."

"Right oh," said Tom in more cheerful accents, and he departed.

That evening she was quite kind to Tom, for she knew that she had really hurt his feelings by going out with Lord Scredington, not that that would prevent her doing so again if she decided to risk it. She showed herself delighted to go with him to Stoll's; she showed herself delighted with the entertainment provided for them. He bought her chocolates to eat at the film, and after the film they had coffee and cakes at a café. She learnt that she had

perhaps been too kind, for when he said good-night to her at the door of the shop, he tried, with the clumsiness of the true lover, to snatch a kiss.

Miss Timmins had become admirably expert in the art of evading kisses ; though she was caught wholly off her guard, she evaded this one with ease, and then she smacked his face with extraordinary vigour.

“ That’ll teach you ! ” she said viciously and slipped into the shop and slammed the door.

To her surprise she found herself astonishingly upset by Tom’s action. Could it be that she wished to be kissed only by Lord Scredington ? The idea was perfectly silly ! She told herself that it was.

CHAPTER VII

THE RESCUE

TWO mornings later Lord Scredington came out of the Golden Cave Club at a few minutes past three. He came out of it in a cheerful, even philanthropic, mood. Nothing would content that philanthropic mood but that he should go round to the shop in Devonshire Street to make sure that no one was burgling it. He had thoughts of knocking Miss Timmins up and making sure that she was unharmed. He sometimes had thoughts like that in the early morning.

As his car came quietly into the street, his keen eyes caught sight of what looked like a shadow pressed against the door of the shop, and his car had not gone ten yards up the street before he saw that that shadow had vanished.

He stopped the car and walked quietly to the door of the shop, with his wits of a sudden quite clear and working freely. He was not surprised that it opened to the pressure of his hand. He opened it quietly, listened for a minute, then he entered noiselessly and stood still, listening again with all his ears. A stair creaked. There came five seconds of silence. Then another stair creaked.

He struck a match, found the switch of the electric light, switched it on, and looked round for a weapon. Against the back wall he saw a broom. As he took it up another stair creaked.

He switched off the electric light, opened the door at the back of the shop, went through it noiselessly on the tips of his toes. He had once chased Miss Timmins along the passage and knew where the staircase was. He felt for the banisters and found them, slipped the handle of the broom between two of them and held it firmly about a foot above the sixth stair.

Then he snapped: "Come out of it!"

There came a grunt of surprise from high up the staircase, a short pause; then the burglar came out of it with a rush. He dashed lightly down the stairs till the bottom of his right shin found the broom handle. Then he dived clean into the door into the shop, drove it open, and came a thundering cropper in the middle of the floor. When he recovered from the first shock he found himself in the middle of the floor of the brightly lighted shop, but the fact that Lord Scredington was sitting on him did not help him to get his breath back any more quickly.

As he realised this, a door opened at the top of the stairs, and Miss Timmins cried: "All right, dad. Don't bother to get up! It's only something fallen down. I'll see to it."

Light feet came pattering down the stairs; and Miss Timmins came into the shop, wearing a blue dressing gown, her little bare feet very white under its hem. She looked scared; but she wore a determined air, and the gat was in her hand.

She stared at Lord Scredington and he stared at her and took in the picture. Then he said: "I've got your burglar. What would you like me to do with him?"

Miss Timmins stood frowning, thinking hard and quickly. Police proceedings would be unpleasant and a waste of time.

"It seems a pity," she said. "But I think you'd better let him go."

"Let him go?" said Lord Scredington blankly.

"What's the good of having a lot of fuss and bother with the police?" said Miss Timmins.

"There is that. But I don't think he *can* go—yet awhile," said Lord Scredington doubtfully.

He shifted his position, set a knee on his prisoner's back, emptied his pockets of several nasty looking tools, and told him to get up. The burglar lay still, blinking his black eyes. He was a young man. Lord Scredington poked him thoughtfully with his foot and said that he might be shamming, but something might be done with a bucket of water if Miss Timmins could bring them one. The burglar began to wriggle. He seemed to be making really earnest efforts to get his breath back.

"You'd better be quick," said Lord Scredington. "I know how painful cold water will be to you, and cold water it will be."

"He looks as though he'd be better for cold water, and a lot of it," said Miss Timmins in vengeful accents. "And it will be all right because this floor is going to be scrubbed to-morrow morning."

"Yes; you'd better get it," said Lord Scredington.

By a magnificent effort the burglar sat up, and for a minute and a half they gazed at him with unsympathetic eyes.

Then Lord Scredington said: "It's no use; we can't stand about here for the rest of the night. Fetch the bucket of water."

Miss Timmins moved towards the door at the back of the shop.

With a yet more magnificent effort, the burglar rose to his feet. He groaned as he did so, for he had found the floor much harder than his knees. He took a step towards the door into the street and then another. They were not good steps; his knees did not seem to be in good working order. Indeed, it looked as if he would not be of much use as a burglar for several days. Then he waggled his knees backwards and forwards and improved their action a little, reached the door in a tottering walk, and went through it.

Lord Scredington let him get a few steps down the street, then he opened the door and shouted after him: "I'll give you thirty yards start, and then I'll shout for the police."

The burglar broke into a tottering run and disappeared into the night and the darkness.

Lord Scredington stepped back into the shop and said cheerfully: "Well, that's that."

"I'm so much obliged to you," said Miss Timmins, in most grateful accents. "That brute might have cut my throat and Daddy's too, and no one been any the wiser. But however did you come to be here at this time in the morning?"

"Oh, I just came round to see if there was anything doing," said Lord Scredington carelessly.

"But it *was* good of you," she said and her grateful eyes shone on him.

They were brighter ever with sleep and excitement; her flushed face was enchanting. She looked very young indeed—about fourteen. Instinctively, without stopping to think—his instinct was like that—Lord Scredington picked her up and kissed her and set her down again.

"Oh, dear! Why will you always do things like that?" cried Miss Timmins, almost in tears. "Just as I was beginning to like you too!"

Lord Scredington looked at her with astonished eyes; then he said reproachfully: "If you could see yourself in a looking-glass, you wouldn't ask such a silly question. What else could I do? But I tell you what; you just run upstairs and fetch the gong. I'm going to take care of it for you, in my bank, till that Chinaman comes for it."

Miss Timmins hesitated, frowning at him. She was rather relieved that he had changed the subject, for he had looked so sincere when he said that he could not help it, that she did not know what more she could say about it.

She said nothing. She went upstairs and took the spirit-gong out of the drawer. Then she looked at herself carefully and at length in the looking-glass. Really there were reasons why Lord Scredington could not help it. She felt less annoyed with him.

She put on her slippers and brought the spirit-gong

down, and wrapped it up in paper and handed it to him.

He shook hands with her and said good-night with the most serious politeness; then he said: "You can't think—you can't even dream how much I should like to kiss you again!"

Miss Timmins said nothing; she had said nothing since her short outburst. He sighed and went quickly through the door and shut it quietly behind him.

Miss Timmins set the back of a chair under the handle of the door; then she made haste up the stairs to consider again in her looking-glass the reasons why he could not help it, and why he desired so keenly to do it again.

* * *

The next morning Yu Chi Ting came into the shop to tell Miss Timmins that he had received a cable to assure him that his message about the spirit-gong was on its way to his grandfather. As he was telling her this, another customer came into the shop, a ferrety-faced young fellow, who looked as if he might be a clerk of a shady solicitor. Miss Timmins decided that it would be better not to tell Yu Chi Ting about the two attempts to steal the gong; it would only worry him and make the gong none the more secure.

"That's splendid," she said sympathetically. "A friend of mine is keeping it safe at his bank for me, but I shall have it here ready for you at eleven o'clock on Thursday week."

It did not occur to her that that ferrety-faced customer would be taking any interest in their

conversation, for he was earnestly studying the china in a cabinet on the other side of the shop.

Yu Chi Ting thanked her and bade her good-morning and went away.

The ferrety-faced customer came forward and asked her if she had any Crown Derby cups and saucers. She told him that at the moment she had none, though she often had them. He said that he would look in again in a few days and went. It was only later that she realised that he had come into the shop on purpose to hear her conversation with the young Chinaman.

The rest of the fortnight passed without any further attempt to burgle the house. On the appointed morning, Lord Scredington arrived with the spirit-gong at a few minutes to eleven.

He and Miss Timmins studied it for the last time, mournfully discussing its beauty and deploring the facts that it was about to leave England for ever and that they would never see it again.

Then Yu Chi Ting came into the shop. He was not at all impassive that morning, but excited and eager, and his eyes grew yet brighter at the sight of the gong. He greeted Miss Timmins politely and handed a small roll of banknotes to her. She counted them with fingers that fumbled a little at handling so large a sum, made sure that they amounted to a hundred and fifty pounds, and locked them up in a drawer. Then she wrapped up the spirit-gong carefully and neatly and gave it to him.

He thanked her warmly.

"It has been rather a business," said Miss Timmins,

who did not see why credit should not be given where credit was due. "The shop was burgled twice before the gong was taken to the Bank and Baron Gageschi, a Moldo-Wallachian gentleman, tried very hard to get me to sell it to him for five hundred pounds."

"You don't say so?" said Yu Chi Ting in natural astonishment. "I—I ought to have kept watch over your house, every night."

"I should advise you to guard it very carefully and get it out of the country as quickly as you possibly can," said Lord Scredington. "If these people get to know you've got it, you'll never get it out of the country at all. It will either stay here with Baron Gageschi or go with him to Moldo-Wallachia."

"Thank you. I am getting it out of the country at once. It will be in the post, registered and insured, in less than twenty minutes," said Yu Chi Ting.

He thanked Miss Timmins warmly for keeping the spirit-gong for him so safely, and for not letting Baron Gageschi have it for five hundred pounds. Then he bade them good-day and went out of the shop.

"And that's that," said Lord Scredington, looking at her with gloomy eyes.

"You'll think it awfully silly of me; but sometimes it really hurts me to have to part with a beautiful thing like that," said Miss Timmins almost sorrowfully confidential.

"I don't. I could almost weep myself," said Lord Scredington. "But another time you'll know what to do."

"What?" said Miss Timmins.

"Sell the beautiful thing to me, and then you can come round to my flat and look at it for as long as you like whenever you want to."

On his words there came a sudden outcry up the street.

"By jove! They're getting the gong off him!" cried Lord Scredington and dashed out of the shop.

Miss Timmins followed him. Thirty yards down the street a group of rough-looking corner-boys were hammering Yu Chi Ting. Even as Lord Scredington started towards them, one of them broke from the group, rushed down the street and handed a parcel to a man in the tonneau of the large blue car waiting at the bottom of it.

"It's Baron Gageschi!" cried Miss Timmins.

Lord Scredington swung round and jumped into the driver's seat of his car. How and why Miss Timmins tumbled into the tonneau she never could tell. It must have been the human instinct to be where things are doing. By the time she had picked herself up and was on the seat, the car was round the corner, racing after the blue car.

Then Baron Gageschi looked back.

He must have observed that a car had been standing in front of Mr. Timmins's shop and that the car that was following him was that car, for he leant forward and spoke to his chauffeur, and the chauffeur accelerated. So did Lord Scredington. The blue car turned sharply at Southampton Row, turned again at the corner of Russell Square, ran through the Square to Percy Street and along it, turned north again and then ran west, and then south. Sometimes losing

ground, sometimes gaining ground, Lord Scredington stuck to the blue car. He was not thirty yards behind it when it stopped almost with a jerk at the Jugo-Slav Embassy.

The Baron jumped from the car and scuttled up the steps. He was half-way through the door when the infinitely quicker Lord Scredington reached him. They entered the hall together, Lord Scredington's arm affectionately round "The Vampire's" neck, lifting him from his feet in the impressive gesture known as scragging him. They entered with a violent celerity and knocked a footman down before he could get out of their way. In pained astonishment he yelled, and the other two footmen in the hall sprang forward.

Lord Scredington tore the spirit-gong from "The Vampire's" grip; then he fairly threw him at them, and turned to go. The bulky missile stopped one of the footmen, but the other gripped Lord Scredington and held on to him. Then Miss Timmins appeared at the wide-open door and very sensibly screamed.

There was a pause; then, at this unusual sound in those inviolate precincts, doors were thrown open all round the hall and out came attachés and secretaries and clerks, and about fifteen voices said in several tongues: "What's the matter?"

Then out of a door at the back of the hall came the Ambassador himself.

"What's all this?" he cried, in a voice that dominated the tumult; at the sound of it the babble and hubbub died down.

"This gentleman was assaulting Baron Gageschi,"

said the footman who had been knocked down, pointing at Lord Scredington.

"Assaulting one of my suite? In the Embassy itself! What does this mean?" cried the Ambassador, turning fiercely on Lord Scredington.

"Assaulting a damned thief!" snapped Lord Scredington hotly. "This ruffian here, Gageschi, set a gang of roughs to rob Mr. Yu Chi Ting, a customer of this young lady, of a jade spirit-gong he had just bought from her. We followed him in my car and caught him on your doorstep and I recovered it."

He held out the parcel for the Ambassador to see.

The Ambassador looked at the parcel and looked at Lord Scredington and hesitated, frowning. The accusation sounded monstrous, but Lord Scredington's appearance gave weight to it. It was impressive. Miss Timmins told herself that he looked like—like a gleaming sword, and then told herself that that was silly.

"Who are you, sir?" said the Ambassador.

"Lord Scredington, your Excellency."

The Ambassador hesitated again. He had not been long in London and he had not met Lord Scredington, but he knew who he was. He told himself that no English peer would bring such an accusation against Baron Gageschi without believing himself to have a good reason for it. He turned to the scowling Baron and spoke to him sharply in the Moldo-Wallachian tongue. A quick interchange of questions and answers followed. The voice of the Ambassador rose higher and higher and grew sterner and sterner; the Baron slowly came to look the most disagreeable

young man in the world ; the Ambassador came to look one of the most worried.

Then after a final snarl at Baron Gageschi, he turned to Lord Scredington and said in civil enough accents : " Please come this way."

Lord Scredington hesitated for a moment, then he followed the Ambassador ; sticking to Lord Scredington, Miss Timmins followed him too. The Ambassador led them into the room at the back of the hall, out of which he had come, and shut the door.

He turned to them with an exceedingly worried air and said in his excellent English : " You have acted quite rightly, Lord Scredington. It is a disgraceful affair. Baron Gageschi was proposing to use his official position to serve his personal ends." He looked from one to the other of them, hesitating again and frowning, then he added : " I should very much prefer to punish Baron Gageschi myself, if it could be arranged."

It was Lord Scredington's turn to hesitate ; he thought that the Baron certainly ought to go to prison, and that was where he wanted him.

Then Miss Timmins laid her hand on his arm and said : " It would be much the best. The police are such a bother, always."

It flashed on Lord Scredington that her mission in life, or one of them, seemed to be to induce him to compound felonies.

" Oh, well——" he said, unable to make up his mind on the spur of the moment.

" You have recovered this spirit-gong. Therefore, it is not really essential that the affair should go to

the police or the press, if you could arrange it. This Chinaman might not wish to press the matter since he recovers his property and does not know, at present at any rate, who had it," said the Ambassador in a tone that was at once persuasive and urgent. "And it would really be a very unpleasant scandal from which nothing could be gained, and I assure you that I will see that the Baron is severely punished."

Lord Scredington ceased to hesitate. He had early acquired a dislike of scandals. He said: "Very well, your Excellency, I will try to arrange it. I think that Mr. Yu Chi Ting will be so pleased to recover the spirit-gong with so little delay that he will not be vindictive." He paused; then he added: "But all the same, I should have liked——"

His expression had grown vengeful again.

"Thank you. It's very good of you—very," the Ambassador broke in hastily, as if he did not desire to give Lord Scredington's second thoughts time to mature. "I'm very much obliged to you indeed." He opened the door almost hastily, as if to nip those second thoughts in the bud.

"Well, I'll do my best, sir," said Lord Scredington, and half turning, he slipped his hand through Miss Timmins's arm and led her through the door.

The secretaries, the attachés, the clerks, already strongly reinforced, were gathered round the three footmen, who had seen the Baron and Lord Scredington enter the Embassy together, and there was a hubbub of excited voices that died down as they passed through the hall, and the speakers turned to stare at Lord Scredington and Miss Timmins.

The Ambassador went through the front door with them, and on the top of the steps he said to Lord Scredington: "I'm very much obliged to you. And where is the shop of this young lady?"

Lord Scredington told him that it was in Devonshire Street, and the Ambassador made a note of the address and the name of Miss Timmins. Evidently, the Embassy would purchase an object of art from Mr. Timmins. That was as it should be. Then he again thanked Lord Scredington warmly and shook hands with him and Miss Timmins.

Lord Scredington led her down the steps to the car. He found one of his motoring caps for her, which did not fit at all; but it was better than nothing.

They returned to Devonshire Street by another and even more devious route, for Lord Scredington had no wish to meet any policeman who had seen the two cars racing. On the way they discussed the affair in all its bearings with the liveliest interest.

Their business was now to find Yu Chi Ting. Miss Timmins found his address and put on her hat and coat; and they went together to his rooms lower down the street. They found him in his sitting-room in an easy chair, with a bruised forehead and a blackened eye, looking very shaky and wholly disconsolate. The sight of the precious parcel restored him almost on the instant.

Lord Scredington offered to drive him to the post office, from which he proposed to despatch the gong. He accepted the offer gratefully and packed it very carefully and tightly, with cotton wool, in the box he

had ready for it. He sealed the box, on which the address had already been painted. They walked down the street to the car, bade Miss Timmins good-bye and drove off.

On the way Lord Scredington explained that he had definitely arranged that the overworked police should not be troubled with the matter, since the stolen gong had been recovered. As the Ambassador had suggested, Yu Chi Ting raised no objection to this. Indeed, he seemed relieved that he was to be saved further trouble in the matter.

The box was despatched. Yu Chi Ting turned from the counter to Lord Scredington and said: "I'm very obliged and grateful."

"Not at all," said Lord Scredington; then he sighed and added: "It's a pity it's going such a long way off."

CHAPTER VIII

A CHANGE OF SWORDS

UNCERTAINTY may, to some men, be a charm in a woman; it is hardly, to any woman, a charm in a man. If Miss Timmins had been deeply interested in Lord Scredington, and never would she admit to herself that she was anything of the kind, she would have found his uncertainty exasperating. She never knew when he would come or not come; he might come three days running, and then he might not come for ten days. After the business of the spirit-gong her interest in him was undoubtedly quickened; the quality of his kiss after the burglar had gone, so different from the usual kisses he obtained by violence or fraud, and his face when he turned furious on the Ambassador, clung to her mind. It was natural, therefore, that she should look for him to come again with some impatience, not that she would have admitted to herself that she was looking for him to come, much less that she was impatient for his coming; but, when eight days passed and he did not come, she was conscious of a disappointment and an exasperation. Even the fact that she had bought during those eight

days three frocks, two hats, three pairs of shoes, and stockings and gloves, could not free her mind from that disappointment and that exasperation.

On the ninth day there was a sale at Farringdon's auction rooms. She had but little hope of finding Lord Scredington there, for the few pieces of hard stone in the sale were not of the kind to bring him to it. She went to it herself to buy a set of lacquer *saké* cups, on commission, for a customer and three pieces of really fine lacquer for the shop. The most important pieces in the sale were two dozen fine Japanese swords.

Now the heart of Japan was in the sword. However admirable may be the paintings, prints, lacquer, ivories or bronze, the supreme artistic achievement of Japan was a sword blade forged by Masamune, Muramasa, Sadamune, or Rai Kunitsugu. A prince would leave a province to one son and one of these swords to another. The son who had the sword was reckoned the luckier man, and fighting-men would journey a hundred miles to see it.

Miss Timmins did not share with the Japanese this passion for the sword. She would buy prints or lacquer, or ivory, or bronze, whenever she could obtain a lot at a price which made it practically certain that she would sell it at a pleasing profit; she would even buy, with the same pleasing profit in view, Japanese sword-guards of strange metals, shakudo, sentoku, and shibuichi, the exquisite work of which would have made Benvenuto Cellini, could he have seen them, howl with envious rage. But a sword she would not buy, unless a collector paid her

a commission to buy it for him. For lethal weapons she had no use.

The beginning of the sale did not interest her. Farrington was selling netsuke, and dutifully, but listlessly, she was writing on the margin of her catalogue the price of each lot as the hammer fell. She was not aware that she was watching the door in a certain expectancy, but she was. During the sale of lot 44 she saw a young man in spectacles come into the room and stand just inside the door, looking about him with an air of not being at all at home in it.

In a quite detached fashion she decided that it was a pity that he had to wear spectacles, for he was a good-looking boy with an oddly wistful face that made her feel that she would rather like to look after him. Most women had that feeling about John Roaker. It was uncalled for; John Roaker could look after himself. He did so—often.

Lot 45 was sold and she jotted down the price of it. Then she saw that the good-looking boy was talking to Cartwright, the commissionaire who kept the door, and that they were looking at her. They talked for another half minute, and then Cartwright came over to her.

He bent down and said in her ear: "Please, Miss, there's a young American gentleman over by the door there who'd like you to buy a couple of lots for him."

"I will—at least, I'll bid for them, Cartwright, thank you," said Miss Timmins, gratefully.

If any one asked Cartwright's advice about which

of the dealers present he should employ to buy lots for him, Cartwright always recommended Miss Timmins. He admired Miss Timmins; also he knew she could be trusted to buy a lot as cheaply as anyone, and he had a suspicion that Farrington's hammer dropped just a little more quickly for her than for any other bidder, dealer or collector. If Cartwright always remembered Miss Timmins when called on to recommend, Miss Timmins always remembered Cartwright at the close of the transaction.

She rose and walked round the table with him to confer with the young man. As she drew near him, John Roaker found that the suspicion that had entered his mind when he had seen her at a distance was well grounded; she had a face that made him feel that he would rather like to look after her. Most men had that feeling about Miss Timmins. It was uncalled for; Miss Timmins could look after herself. She did so—often.

"This is Miss Timmins, sir. You couldn't be in better hands, sir," said Cartwright in hearty accents by way of introduction.

"That's good," said John Roaker, taking off his hat with the shy air that helped women to like him. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Miss Timmins."

Miss Timmins smiled at him. He had not often seen eyes so blue and he had never seen anyone so pretty look so capable. He did not hesitate for a moment to entrust to her the business of buying the swords he wanted.

He told her that out of the twenty-four swords that were being sold, each as a separate lot, he wished

her to buy two lots, 93 and 94. Both of them were *katana*—long two-handed swords. Lot 93 was a Bizen blade, forged by Norimitsu, in February, 1456. It was a very good blade, without a scratch on it, and polished to a mirror-like clearness. Lot 94 was also a mirror-blade and it was the pick of all the blades in the sale and, indeed, of all the blades that had been sold anywhere in Europe during the previous seven or eight years. It was undated, but Rai Kunitsugu had signed it with the signature he used between 1280 and 1300. It was an admirable blade, of an astonishing balance, and in the hands of an expert would cut through the finest Ferrara or Toledo blade as if it were blotting-paper. Both the swords were in wooden sheaths, with wooden hilts, in which the Japanese warriors used to keep them during the short intervals of peace in their strenuous lives. The only method of distinguishing one from the other when in their wooden sheaths, which were of the same size, was by the signatures, which were engraved not only on the tangs of the blades, but also painted in black ink on the outside of the sheaths.

John Roaker instructed Miss Timmins to bid up to £40 for the sword by Norimitsu and up to £120 for the sword by Rai Kunitsugu—wretched prices compared with those the warriors, for whom they were forged, paid for them in the thirteenth and fifteenth century. But the sword is superseded. Miss Timmins thought it more than likely that he would get both of them for £160, for no very keen collector of swords was present, except Mr. Bramley-Bowkett, and she had never known him pay more than £50

for a sword; though she did not know, of course, what commissions had been left with Farringdon.

The two swords were still about twenty lots off. Miss Timmins went back to her chair at the table; John Roaker followed her and set another chair behind hers and talked to her in a low voice as the sale went on, asking her questions about the lots as they were put up. He bought two lots of netsuke because she said that they were good, or rather, she bought them for him.

Then Farringdon began to sell the swords. As Miss Timmins expected, seeing that none of the really keen collectors were present, prices were running low. The dealers were having it all their own way, and really good blades were going for fifteen and twenty pounds apiece. Miss Timmins kept an eye on Mr. Bramley-Bowkett. She saw that he did not bid for any of them. Evidently, he was waiting for the Norimitsu or the Rai Kunitsugu.

This did not displease her. She did not want either of the swords to go for an old song; the higher the price they were sold for, the higher would be her commission; and though she liked this shy and wistful American boy—he was evidently not more than six years older than she—she felt that if he could run to a hundred and twenty pounds for a sword, he could very well afford the extra six pounds for her commission if Mr. Bramley-Bowkett ran it up to that sum.

At last lot 93, the Norimitsu blade, was put up. Miss Timmins did not join in the bidding till one of the dealers who were competing for it bid fifteen

pounds. At twenty pounds Mr. Bramley-Bowkett joined in the bidding. She was pleased. That meant that the blade was going up to thirty pounds. It did go to thirty pounds, and then the dealers dropped out, leaving her and Mr. Bramley-Bowkett bidding against one another. She went on bidding; Bramley-Bowkett went on bidding. Hopefully she bid forty pounds; Bramley-Bowkett bid forty-one.

She turned and whispered to John Roaker: "Shall I go on?"

He looked disappointed, more wistful than ever indeed. But he shook his head.

"No; when I fix my limit, I stick to it," he said firmly, but sadly.

Miss Timmins approved of this practice. It was her own. But she was sorry to lose the commission. Farrington knocked down the sword to Mr. Bramley-Bowkett.

Then the sword of Rai Kunitsugu was put up. Miss Timmins told herself, with a grim satisfaction, that if Mr. Bramley-Bowkett wanted this sword, he would have to put up a much better fight for it, and she turned to him with the eyes of a warrior measuring a foe. To her surprise, he had risen from his chair and was walking up the room, manifestly to pay for the sword and take it away with him. He was looking uncommonly pleased. At least his lips, as a rule so tightly set, were parted in a smile, and his small eyes, none too far apart, were shining brightly.

Farrington put up the Rai Kunitsugu sword, and the bidding began. Only dealers were bidding for it. Miss Timmins joined in it. Several dealers went on

bidding for the sword with considerable briskness up to forty pounds; then they began to slacken. At fifty pounds only one, her friend, G. Higgins, was left contending with Miss Timmins. He did not last; the sword was knocked down to her for fifty-four pounds.

The chair on which John Roaker was sitting squeaked, and she heard him breathe a deep sigh of satisfaction.

Then he said: "Gee! If I had only guessed that I was going to get this Rai for two hundred and seventy dollars, I'd have had the Norimitsu too!"

"Well, you've got the most important one, the best blade in the sale by far, anyhow," said Miss Timmins with no less satisfaction.

They leaned back in their chairs, smiling. Mr. Bramley-Bowkett came down the room, carrying the Norimitsu sword in its sheath; he had not waited to have it wrapped in brown paper. He walked briskly down the opposite side of the room and out of the door. As he passed her Miss Timmins fancied that his eyes sought hers in a rather odd look, and that there was a touch of mockery in the smile that still wreathed his lips. She told herself that it was just like the tight-lipped, hard-faced pig to gloat, and that she was very sorry, indeed, that he had got the Norimitsu, and thought no more about it.

She turned her attention again to the sale. There were still six more swords to be sold. She bought for John Roaker the best of them, a blade forged by Nobusada of Kyoto between 1429 and 1440, very nearly as good a blade as that which Mr. Bramley-

Bowkett had wrested from him. She bought it for him for twenty guineas.

Farringdon came to the end of the swords and began to sell sword-guards. Miss Timmins was buying no sword-guards that day, and her lacquer was still many lots away. She thought she might as well fill up the time by taking John Roaker to the clerk sitting beside Farringdon to clear his lots. He paid for them in notes and received the order to deliver them to him and took it to the clerk in charge of the lots that had been sold, who handed them over to him. John dropped the two lots of netsuke into his jacket pocket and took up the Rai Kunitsugu.

Smiling, he drew the blade half out of the wooden sheath and gazed at it with admiring eyes. Of a sudden they opened wide; the smile faded from his face; it became a mask of dismay.

"Sakes alive!" he muttered under his breath; then he turned the sheath in his hand and looked at the name painted on it.

"B—b—but, this isn't the Rai," he stammered. "It's the Norimitsu."

"What?" cried Miss Timmins in a tone of incredulous horror; and she fairly snatched the sword from his hands.

"It is the Norimitsu," he repeated.

"But it's labelled lot 94," she said in a doubting tone.

"I don't care what it's labelled!" John Roaker protested rather more loudly. "It's the Norimitsu blade!"

Miss Timmins turned to the clerk and said: "Is it really a Norimitsu blade, Mr. Masters?"

Masters, the office expert on Japanese signatures, looked at the sheath and said: "The name painted on the sheath is certainly Norimitsu. But we had better go into the office and make quite sure by examining the signature on the tang."

"I don't want to see any signatures!" snapped John Roaker with no little heat. "When I've seen and handled a blade once I know it for good and all. This isn't the blade that was catalogued Rai Kunit-sugu!"

"Let's go along to the office and get it set right," said Miss Timmins in a soothing voice.

"But *will* they set it right?" asked John Roaker in incredulous accents.

"Of course they will. Farrington's have nothing to do with this; they wouldn't," said Miss Timmins with decision and in a reassuring tone. "They'll set it right at once without any fuss whatever." Then, bethinking herself of the laws governing sales by auction, she added in a less reassuring tone: "If they can."

They went into the office; with a hammer and a small punch, Masters knocked out the peg which, running through the hilt and tang, fastened the hilt to the blade, and drew off the hilt. On the tang was engraved the signature of Norimitsu of Bizen, and the date was the second month of the year 1456.

Masters brought Spencer, Farrington's partner, and told him what had happened.

Then he said: "I'm quite certain that the right

labels were on the swords originally, for I catalogued all the Japanese stuff myself."

"And I'm certain of that too—leastways, I'm quite certain that when I looked at those swords yesterday, the Rai Kunitsugu was labelled 94," said John Roaker with convincing certainty.

"Oh, we'll set it right—we'll set it right at once," said Spencer cheerfully. "Who bought lot 93? Probably he's in the sale room still, and if he's gone, we'll get in touch with him at once."

"He's gone all right, sir, and the sword has gone with him," said Masters in rueful accents. "It was Mr. Bramley-Bowkett, and he cleared it as soon as he bought it."

"The devil it was!" cried Spencer and the cheerfulness cleared swiftly from his face. "Then he's changed the labels again!"

Masters nodded.

"Confound it all! But I gave instructions—special instructions—that he was to be watched very carefully all the time whenever he came to look at the things on view!" said Spencer angrily.

"I've no doubt that he was watched very carefully," said Masters dryly.

"Confound him!" said Spencer.

He turned, frowning, to Miss Timmins and John Roaker and said: "I am very sorry, Miss Timmins, and you, sir, but I'm afraid I can't promise that I shall be able to set it right. This trick has been played on us before. We shall try our best, of course, to get Mr. Bramley-Bowkett to let you have the Rai Kunitsugu and take the Norimitsu. But the law of

auction sales roughly is, that you buy what you see put up for sale, and the catalogue does not matter unless there is definite misrepresentation, and, frankly, I haven't much hope of succeeding in persuading him to do so. All I can do is to refund you the money you have paid for the blade."

There seemed, indeed, to be nothing else to be done. Ruefully and protesting that it was the sword and not the money that he wanted, John Roaker received from Spencer the £54 he had paid for the Norimitsu blade, and sadly put the notes back into his note-case.

Then Miss Timmins asked Spencer what he proposed to do with it if Mr. Bramley-Bowkett did refuse to return the Rai Kunitsugu, and he told her that they would keep it until the next sale of good swords.

Then he added: "Though, of course, we're going to be out of pocket over it, for it won't fetch fifty-four pounds under its own name."

CHAPTER IX

MISS TIMMINS AGAIN DANCES AT THIBAULT'S

THEY came out of the office, both of them gloomy and Miss Timmins looking uncommonly thoughtful. She returned to her chair, and John Roaker sat down behind her. In a low voice she deplored his bad luck in such a sympathetic fashion that she presently removed most of the gloom from his face. Then he paid her her commission, or rather he tried to, for there was a dispute about it. The two lots of netsuke and the Nobusada sword had cost him thirty pounds, so that Miss Timmins's commission was thirty shillings. But John Roaker said that, since she actually bought lot 94 for him for £54, he owed her another fifty-four shillings. He thought that she was going to take it. He found that he had another think coming. It looked to be about as easy for him to push over Nelson's Column with his good left hand as to induce Miss Timmins to accept money she did not think she had earned. He had never dreamt that anything so delicate and charming to the eye could be so like adamant. Sadly he paid her her thirty shillings.

Farringdon had been selling iron most of the time they had been debating the matter of the fifty-four shillings, and now came the lacquer. The set of *saké* cups was put up and Miss Timmins bought it at a price which would please the client who had entrusted to her the business of buying it. Then, each at an interval of a few lots, came the three pieces of lacquer she had decided to try to buy for the shop. The first two of them were knocked down to her at reasonable prices, the third and the worst fetched nearly twice as much as she was prepared to give for it. She went up to the desk and paid for the two and said that she would call for them next day. She might have brought a suit-case with her and saved herself the next day's journey, but she had a superstition that if she did bring a suit-case or hand-bag with her she would never get anything knocked down to her to take away in it.

John Roaker, who had attached himself to her rather in the manner of a lost lamb, said with a becoming timidity: "Say, won't you come along somewhere and have tea with me?"

As a rule Miss Timmins icily discouraged clients who, as they were only too prone to do, became attentive. She did not discourage John Roaker; she felt that he ought to receive some compensation for his disappointment in losing the Rai Kunitsugu, and she had a feeling that her society would be that compensation, or at any rate some of it.

But it was in quite matter of fact accents that she said: "Thanks. I should like to. I want to talk about the Rai Kunitsugu. If that disgusting Bram-

ley-Bowkett thinks he's going to do me in the eye like that, he's wrong."

"But there's nothing to be done about the Rai. The partner in the office said there wasn't," he protested.

"Oh, isn't there?" said Miss Timmins more than a trifle scornfully.

"Where would you like to go? Which is the nicest place in London? You know all about it and I know nothing, so you must choose," he said gratefully. Then he added shyly: "Perhaps you'd go somewhere where we could dance?"

She hesitated; then she smiled a wicked smile.

"We might go to Thibault's," she said. "It has the best floor and the best band in London."

John Roaker did not observe that wicked smile, and had he seen it, he could not have guessed that it had flashed on Miss Timmins that Lord Seredington seemed to affect Thibault's and that she could at least give him the pleasure of seeing that she was appreciated by someone else, and that someone else wholly presentable; and at the same time she might gratify her own curiosity to see the lady, or ladies, with whom he was in the habit of dancing. John Roaker made haste to take her to Thibault's.

On entering, she was again conscious of a sense of disappointment, but it could not be because Lord Seredington was not there. They were, however, rather early. John Roaker ordered tea, and at once she began upon the matter of the Rai Kunitsugu. She said that if the Farringdon people failed to do anything, and she did not think that they would

be able to do anything, she must have a little time to handle it. He said that in three days' time he was going to Paris for a fortnight, that he had to go to Paris on business, that he could come back to London for a week before returning to the United States. She said that that should give her plenty of time to deal with the matter. Then she bade him write the Japanese signature of Rai Kunitsugu on the back of one of his cards so that if ever again she saw the sheath of the sword she would know it. Eagerly, he asked her what her plan was.

She shook her head and said: "No: It's no use talking about it; it's just waste of breath. It may come off and it may not."

He did not press her to tell him; he had a feeling that the matter could not be in much better hands.

Then tea came, and the dancing began. She found him an excellent dancer. After the first dance they came back to their tea, and between the dances he told her about himself. He seemed desirous that she should know. He came from Toledo, Illinois, in which town he was his father's partner in a large and prosperous hard-ware store. He explained that what he called a hard-ware store she would call an iron-monger's. It was the accident of having been born in the town of Toledo that had turned his mind to the study of swords, because the sword-smiths of the city of Toledo in Spain had been famous for their blades. The study of swords had led him to collect them, and now that he was making fifty thousand dollars a year, he was able to collect them freely. Only the year before he had learnt that the Japanese sword is

the greatest of all swords, and he had spent the greater part of the three months he had been in England hunting for them. He had been uncommonly fortunate, for he was taking back seventeen fine Japanese blades to Toledo, but not, alas! the Rai Kunitsugu.

He talked with enthusiasm about Japanese swords, and Miss Timmins let him talk, for he really knew almost all that was to be known about them, and she could never learn enough about Oriental works of art. Besides, she enjoyed watching him. She felt that to a sophisticated London art dealer of nearly twenty this fresh, boyish enthusiasm was very soothing.

Then Lord Scredington came in with a very pretty woman, dark-eyed, dark-haired, with a clear and lovely complexion, but wearing a discontented air that looked as if it did not come off. Miss Timmins knew everything that the eye could tell about that pretty lady long before Lord Scredington had perceived that his favourite dealer in Oriental works of art was in the room. But the things that her eyes told her gave her no pleasure at all. She realised at once how much she disliked brunettes. Of course, Lord Scredington, being so fair and tall, would be attracted by a slight, dark woman, and, no less naturally, that slight, dark woman would be admirably and most expensively dressed. Miss Timmins had put on one of her new frocks to attend the sale in, not, of course, because she had a hope that Lord Scredington would be there, but because it was necessary to make a good impression on the other dealers, and it

was a pretty frock. But now she liked it less than she had done when she set out in it.

The only pleasing thing about the dark lady was that she must be at least as old, or even older than Lord Scredington, twenty-eight, or twenty-nine—a great age for a woman.

Miss Timmins and John Roaker again danced. As they passed the table at which Lord Scredington and the lady were sitting, Lord Scredington recognised her. Miss Timmins saw him recognise her; she saw his rather startled air; she saw him turn his eyes on John Roaker and stare at him; she saw him frown slightly. She was glad that John Roaker was wearing such nice clothes, that he was wholly presentable. She was glad also that he was tall and dark; it was natural that she, being slight and fair, should be attracted by a man who was tall and dark. She leant back a little to smile sweetly up at John Roaker.

Lord Scredington saw that sweet smile. But he did not see, as Miss Timmins did, that John Roaker was too busy dancing to see it. Lord Scredington did not bend down to smile sweetly into the slight, dark lady's face. He was staring rather blankly after Miss Timmins and John Roaker. His frown deepened; Miss Timmins saw it deepen.

She knew now with whom he danced at Thibault's; he knew now with whom she danced at Thibault's. They were therefore on level terms. The information that she had acquired seemed to have the most pleasing effect upon her; never had smiled she upon anyone more sweetly or more often than she smiled

on John Roaker—for the most part when he was not looking and Lord Scredington was. The information that he had acquired seemed to have no pleasing effect at all on Lord Scredington, and presently, though no one could have said that he was actually scowling, he was certainly frowning very deeply.

Then it appeared to Miss Timmins that the so beautifully dressed, slight, dark lady asked him what was troubling him; it appeared to her also that he was a trifle short with the lady, for she also frowned and stayed frowning. So it came about that while Miss Timmins and John Roaker were enjoying themselves immensely—it was quite plain, from the sweetness and frequency of her smiles, that Miss Timmins was enjoying herself immensely—Lord Scredington was no longer looking a cheerful and wicked young nobleman, but merely a wicked young nobleman; but the habitual expression of discontent on the face of the pretty lady with him had deepened about two hundred and fifty per cent. and showed no signs of soon becoming shallow again. It was not till the dance was over and she was walking back to her table that Miss Timmins became obviously aware of the presence of Lord Scredington. She nodded and smiled at him, not a very sweet smile, and before he was halfway through a stiff bow she was smiling up at the wistful face of John Roaker with a smile that was almost sugary. But she was not looking at that wistful face so intently that she failed to perceive that Lord Scredington's lips moved. But she did not believe that any sound came from them, and was sure that it was better so.

As she ate one of M. Thibault's famous pastries during the interval before the next dance, she talked to John Roaker with the liveliest animation. Lord Scredington talked to the slight, dark lady with very little animation; but he and she did not seem nearly as pleased with one another as did Miss Timmins and John Roaker. Their rather gloomy air did not detract at all from the enjoyment of Miss Timmins; but of the four it is probable that John Roaker was the only one who was enjoying the afternoon greatly.

But since she and he danced every dance and all of it, Miss Timmins did enjoy the afternoon considerably, in spite of the fact that a pretty, slight, dark lady was dancing with her best customer, for the longer she and John Roaker danced together the more pleasing it was to dance with one another; and of dancing she was very fond. As the afternoon went on and she watched the other pair she ceased to be greatly disquieted by the slight, dark, discontented lady. She and Lord Scredington did not seem to be quite as charmed with one another as they should have been. Doubtless, this was owing to the fact that he seemed preoccupied and unable to give her the whole-hearted attention which a lady of her attractiveness naturally looks for.

The dancing came to an end, and after drinking a cocktail, both John Roaker and Miss Timmins came out of Thibault's with considerable reluctance. On the threshold they paused, and he invited her to dine and dance with him there, or anywhere she preferred, that evening. Miss Timmins hesitated; he was a nice boy and she liked him; she liked to

dine in bright places; she liked to dance with him. If there had not been in the offing, as it were, that good customer, Lord Scredington, she would have dined and danced with John Roaker and with an easy mind let anything develop that might develop. But as it was for her there was somehow or other—she would not go into the matter—absolutely nothing doing, while it looked as though there might be a great deal doing for John Roaker. To let things develop in a one-sided way would not be fair to him. Therefore she refused the invitation.

He looked so deeply disappointed that she compromised; she said that she would come to tea and dance with him at Thibault's the following afternoon. After all, he was going to Paris in three days and would only spend one week in London on his return from that city before going to Toledo, Illinois. No one could take much harm during three days and a week, if they were but indulged with a judicious moderation. They said good-night with mutual expression of esteem.

The next morning Miss Timmins moved about the shop a trifle warily, keeping an eye on the door. She had a feeling that Lord Scredington might come round that morning to ask if she had found any hard stone for him; and he was apt to arrive with the stealthy suddenness of one of those old-fashioned Red Indians on the war-path. Thanks to her carefulness, when he did arrive she had slipped safely behind the counter, so that she gave him no opportunity for one of those displays of his colossal cheek that so ruffled her sensibilities.

He came in, wearing a cheerful air, and greeted her cheerfully. She had a feeling that that cheerfulness was not quite natural, that it was a little forced, and she drew yet further back from the counter and kept herself ready to spring aside. He seemed, however, in a peaceful mood and asked her some question about the sale at Farringdon's the day before and whether she had bought anything at it and if so, what. She told him that she had bought two pieces of lacquer and was going round later in the morning to fetch them. There was a pause.

Then in the most casual tone he said: "I didn't know that you danced at Thibault's with anyone but me."

"I don't often," said Miss Timmins, truthfully.

He paused, waiting for her to develop the theme. It seemed of no interest to her.

Then, in the same casual accents, he asked: "Who was that chap you were dancing with?"

"He's my new dancing partner. Isn't he a nice boy—a dear?" said Miss Timmins with sudden, rather extravagant, enthusiasm.

Lord Scredington did not say that John Roaker was a nice boy. He did not say that he was a dear. He just made a noise in his throat.

Miss Timmins smiled upon him in the friendliest way and said in the kindest accents, almost patronising accents: "That was a pretty lady you were dancing with. Was she your aunt?"

"My aunt?" cried Lord Scredington in a tone in which sudden surprise and sudden indignation were nicely blended.

"I thought she might be," said Miss Timmins hastily and apologetically.

Lord Scredington frowned upon her and said loftily: "If it comes to that, that chap you were dancing with wasn't so much of a boy."

"Oh, yes; he was—quite a boy—twenty-seven—a year younger than you," Miss Timmins protested.

Lord Scredington looked very hard at her.

"Of course he's older than you really—Americans are older than Englishmen I always think," said Miss Timmins in explanatory accents. "And, of course, he's a quite uncommon American: he knows more about Japanese swords than anyone I ever came across. And he's got piles and piles of money and he dances beautifully. But you saw him dance."

Lord Scredington appeared to swallow something; then he said: "Then I should think, taking one thing with another, he'll make you a very nice little husband."

He did not speak in the tone of one who wished the union well.

Miss Timmins blushed; at least she contrived to look as if she blushed; Lord Scredington believed that she was blushing.

She said shyly: "Isn't it rather early to talk about that kind of thing? I only met him yesterday, you know."

"From the way you were getting on I should think that to-morrow would do the trick," said Lord Scredington in a most unpleasant voice.

"Oh, to-morrow?" said Miss Timmins doubtfully.

Lord Scredington appeared to lose his temper—

or at any rate what was left of it. He went up into the air with astonishing velocity and to an astonishing height. He said things, many things, about Miss Timmins. There was probably more truth in many of them than he thought. He compared her to several of God's creatures; one of them was the tigress. Miss Timmins appeared unmoved, but listened with interest. When he came to earth, rather out of breath, she said that she did not know what he was talking about. Yet he had done his best to make it clear. The statement appeared to exasperate him, for he made the spring for which she was quite prepared. He missed her. The failure seemed to cool him down.

He said mournfully that he had never loved a dear gazelle without its having tried to bite a piece out of him.

"It wasn't a gazelle you said I was like," said Miss Timmins.

He appeared taken aback; then he said loftily: "I had my reasons."

After that their relations became again civil and friendly. Presently he invited her to have tea and dance with him at Thibault's that afternoon. Before telling him that she was already engaged to have tea and dance with John Roaker, she asked him if he was sure that his aunt would really like it. Again their relations grew strained. He protested with great heat that that lady was not his aunt. Miss Timmins apologised quite sweetly for her slip of the tongue and told him that she was going to Thibault's with John Roaker. He said several things under his

breath. The only word she caught was the word "jade." She did not think that he was speaking of the nephritic stone. Then he made as if to leave hastily.

"Here! Wait a minute!" she cried. "I want you to do something for me."

CHAPTER X

A MISTAKE REPAIRED

LORD SCREDINGTON stopped short, gasping, he turned on her ; his eyes flashed ; he was on the point of telling her to go somewhere, but checked himself.

She said calmly : " I want you to help me about that horrible Mr. Bramley-Bowkett.

He still looked as if he was about to tell her that he would see her somewhere before he helped her, but, paying no attention to his expression, she plunged into the story of the changing of the swords. The length of the narration gave him time to grow cool and recover from the shock of being asked to do something for her after the way she had behaved.

When she came to an end of it, he said : " Why, the brute got me exactly in the same way ! But the lots were jade cloak-hooks, and like you yesterday, I bid away without looking at them."

" But you haven't had a row with him, I hope," she said anxiously.

" No. There was nothing you could make a row about. The change of lots might have been pure accident—just as this change of swords might be.

But I've been bearing up and keeping an eye on the Bowkett lad on the chance of catching him out over some other trick. When I do, he'll get what's coming to him with compound interest."

"Well, he ought to get some of what's coming to him over this, if it can be worked," she said with animation. "But we mustn't do anything quickly—not while the business is still fresh in his mind. He'd better have at least ten days to forget it in. Then I want you to go round and see him and find out if he's got this Rai Kunitsugu sword on one of his sword-racks and where it exactly is on the rack. I know he had three sword-racks, for I took a sword round to him one day, for Hogbin, to sell to him."

"Right," he said cheerfully. "I'll come into it with pleasure. I'm really quite keen to give the Bowkett lad a lesson. But you'll have to get me Rai Kunitsugu's signature so that I shall be able to tell that it is the Rai Kunitsugu blade directly I see its sheath."

"I've got it here," she said, handing him John Roaker's card, on the back of which he had written Rai Kunitsugu's signature.

He made a face at it, but slipped it into his waistcoat pocket and assumed an air of deep thoughtfulness and said: "I shall have to think this out carefully—very carefully, indeed."

Then, of a sudden—absorbed in the matter of the changed swords, she had grown careless—he grabbed her and kissed her. Miss Timmins's right uppercut only grazed his left ear. She was forced, therefore, to content herself with scathing words about his monstrous and colossal cheek and how far he fell short of

her ideal of the perfect gentleman. He did not seem deeply affected ; his head was certainly not bowed in shame. And Miss Timmins was hardly as indignant as she appeared to be. To herself she passed the matter over lightly ; she told herself that a good customer must be humoured ; she asked herself what was a kiss.

Friendly relations were presently resumed. Twenty minutes later, having cajoled and badgered her into promising him to dance with him at Thibault's the next night but one, he departed.

As soon as he had gone, she walked to Farringdon's with a suit-case, and came back, with the two pieces of lacquer and the *saké* cup in it, on a bus. In the afternoon she met John Roaker at Thibault's. He told her that he had already received a letter from Farringdon, expressing his regret that he had been unable to recover the Rai Kunitsugu.

In the course of the pleasant afternoon they became even better acquainted. At the end of it he asked her to dine and dance with him in the evening. Again she compromised ; she agreed to dance with him at the Hotel Cecil the next afternoon. They met there and she was careful not to dance much lest she should not be quite fresh to dance with Lord Scredington in the evening.

On both afternoons she was careful, or at any rate moderately careful, to keep the relations between herself and John Roaker on a footing of simple friendliness. But, of course, she could not be responsible for her eyes. Her eyes were always doing things on their own account ; and John Roaker was un-

doubtedly a very nice boy. At half-past six he said good-bye to her, cursing the luck which took him to Paris for the fortnight of all fortnights he craved to spend in London.

In the evening she dined and danced with Lord Scredington at Thibault's. In the middle of dinner he asked her with a sufficiently casual air whether she had seen anything more of John Roaker.

"Oh, yes; I danced with him at the Cecil this afternoon," she said carelessly.

He looked at her with uncommonly discontented eyes and said in an uncommonly discontented tone: "I hope to goodness you haven't tired yourself out already."

"Oh, no," she said graciously. "I was careful not to dance much this afternoon, for I much prefer dancing here." Then she added rather unkindly: "I prefer the band and the floor."

"And the food: don't leave out the food," he said, rather bitterly.

"Yes. The food is certainly better here," she said gravely.

He looked so glum that she had to tell him that John Roaker had gone away to Paris and would not return for a fortnight. That seemed to cheer him, and as the evening wore on they forgot John Roaker. If she could have believed that Lord Scredington was sincere in the charming things he said to her now and then, it would have been an enchanting evening. But, for all that his eyes bore witness to the truth of the rather impassioned words he uttered at intervals, she did not believe them sincere, at least she did not

believe them sincere enough. She felt that his attraction to her was not really profound, that he might very well be saying the same things to that slight, dark, discontented lady the very next day. At any rate she had an inkling that her holding herself rather aloof was not likely to lessen what attraction she had for him.

During the next fortnight her life sank to its usual quietness. Twice Lord Scredington came round to the shop to ask if she had found any hard stone for him, and once she dined and danced with him again at Thibault's. Having found Mr. Bramley-Bowkett's address in the telephone book, she watched the house for several evenings. She gathered that he returned at 7.30, apparently to dress for dinner, and left again at 7.50.

On the tenth day after the sale at Farringdon's, Lord Scredington rang him up at eleven one morning and told him that he had an aquamarine cloak-hook, a duplicate, he would exchange with him. Mr. Bramley-Bowkett, with some eagerness, said that he would come round to see it; Lord Scredington said that he was just taking a little exercise and would bring the cloak-hook round to Mr. Bramley-Bowkett's house. He got rather the better of the exchange, and strolled about the room examining the treasures it contained. They did not greatly appeal to him, for Mr. Bramley-Bowkett was a lover of virtuosity. There were three lacquer sword-racks of very fine quality; each had rests for five blades; Lord Scredington found that the Rai Kunitsugu was the third sword on the second rack.

He carried this information to Miss Timmins, and she thanked him warmly for the help he was giving her.

On his return from Paris, John Roaker appeared at the shop at ten in the morning to invite Miss Timmins to dance with him that afternoon. She accepted the invitation graciously and he spent nearly two hours in the shop. He would have bought nearly everything in it, had she let him. But she was very firm with him; she would allow him to spend no more than fifty pounds, and she gave him good value for his money. It was a good morning's work, and when, before departing with the things he had bought, he begged her to lunch with him at Thibault's as well, she accepted. He called for her at half-past one, but before going to Thibault's they called at Farringdon's auction rooms. She did not tell John Roaker that she had hopes of getting the Rai Kunit-sugu for him, for she did not wish him to be buoyed up all the afternoon by hopes that might not be fulfilled. She left him in the vestibule and went into the office and telling Farringdon that she had hopes of getting the Norimitsu blade changed for the Rai Kunitsugu, asked him to let her have it. He was only too pleased to do so.

When she handed it to John Roaker to take care of, she said that she was going to show it to a customer.

They had a very pleasing lunch, and John Roaker told her a great deal more about himself and tried, with no great success, to get her to tell him a great deal more about herself. Miss Timmins was by no means secretive, but she was not given to intimate

confidences. After dancing all the afternoon, he ordered cocktails, and they stayed there, talking, till a quarter past seven.

Then Miss Timmins said: "And now we'll go and have a shot at getting that Rai Kunitsugu for you."

John Roaker looked greatly astonished and greatly pleased.

"But how are we going to get it?" he asked eagerly.

"We are going to do it by your keeping still and saying nothing and doing exactly what I tell you," said Miss Timmins.

They drove in a taxi to Kensington and stopped at the corner of the street in which was Mr. Bramley-Bowkett's house, and watched it. At 7.30 Mr. Bramley-Bowkett arrived in a taxi. Miss Timmins gave him time to get well into his dressing for dinner. Then they walked briskly to the house. Miss Timmins told the maid who opened the door to tell her master that she had come with a sword. The maid smiled in a pleasing fashion at Miss Timmins, whom she had seen several times before, and ushered them into the room in which her master kept most of his treasures and left them.

Before that maid had reached the stairs on her way to tell her master that Miss Timmins had come with a sword, Miss Timmins had the Rai Kunitsugu off the rack and was putting the Norimitsu in its place. In the middle of doing so her quick woman's eye perceived something. She held the two swords side by side.

"Look here," she said quickly in excited accents.

"These two sheaths are just about the same size! Just stick the Norimitsu blade in the Kunitsugu sheath and the Kunitsugu blade in the Norimitsu sheath! I can't bear to handle the beastly things myself."

John Roaker made the change in rather less than three seconds.

Miss Timmins put the Norimitsu blade in the Kunitsugu sheath in its place on the rack and handed the Kunitsugu blade, in the Norimitsu sheath, to him, caught him by the sleeve and hurried him to the end of the room. When Mr. Bramley-Bowkett, in the unstained evening dress of the English gentleman, entered, they were absorbed in the study of a case of jade cloak-hooks.

He greeted Miss Timmins with the expectant warmth of a collector about to add to his collection, and she introduced John Roaker to him. John Roaker displayed no warmth of any kind; he regarded Mr. Bramley-Bowkett with an unpleasant eye.

Miss Timmins became the spokeswoman, a rather voluble spokeswoman, though volubility was not, as a rule, one of her leading characteristics.

"Oh, Mr. Bowkett," she began, in a bright and engaging manner. "The blade I brought is the Norimitsu blade that was sold at Farringdon's last sale."

She paused and Mr. Bramley-Bowkett's face lost the expectant warmth of a collector about to add to his collection, and there came quite a different glitter into his hard little eyes.

"There was a mistake. The two lots got changed—

at least, the labels did," she went on in the same bright and engaging way. "So instead of getting the Norimitsu blade for which you were bidding, you got the Rai Kunitsugu blade, and it was all my fault because I was bidding for Mr. Roaker here and I didn't notice the mistake. So I brought the Norimitsu blade along with me because I was sure that as soon as you learnt that a mistake had been made you'd let him have the Rai Kunitsugu and take the Norimitsu blade you bid for. He's been away to Paris for a fortnight, or I should have brought him round to see you sooner."

Mr. Bramley-Bowkett did not turn a hair, or bat an eye-lid; he became suavely gracious in a hard kind of way and said: "You can't really expect me to be responsible for other people's mistakes, you know, Miss Timmins. I came to bid for the Rai Kunitsugu blade, and when it was passed round, I saw that it was the Rai Kunitsugu blade—of course, it never occurred to me that a mistake had been made in the lot, or I should have drawn Farringdon's attention to it at once—because I was not noticing particularly the numbers of the lots—and I bid for it, and it was knocked down to me. It was the only blade in the sale I wanted, and the fact that I got it uncommonly cheap is neither here nor there. Therefore, naturally, I haven't any intention of parting with it to anybody because it's a blade that particularly attracts me."

"Oh, but it isn't fair to Mr. Roaker. He would have given more—ever so much more for it. In fact he commissioned me to bid up to a hundred and twenty pounds for it, and it was all my fault that he didn't get it," she protested with a more excited volubility.

The face of Mr. Bramley-Bowkett set yet more mulish, and he said less graciously: "No, Miss Timmins; you know quite well the law of auction sales. I got what I bid for, as you might have done if you had attended more closely to your business, and I'm afraid I can do nothing in the matter."

Miss Timmins's face fell and she said slowly: "Then you absolutely refuse to change these swords?"

"I'm afraid I must," said Mr. Bramley-Bowkett in the most dignified accents and with the most dignified air.

Miss Timmins turned to John Roaker and said very sadly indeed: "Then there's nothing more to be done, Mr. Roaker. We may as well go."

They went to the door with a depressed, even gloomy, air. John Roaker opened it to let Miss Timmins through and closed it. He turned and told Mr. Bramley-Bowkett that he had known quite well that the labels on the lots had been changed because he had changed them himself. This was not a slanderous statement because there were no witnesses to it; he was speaking as man to man. Then he called Mr. Bramley-Bowkett a few names—one of the most pleasing of them was "hog"—and went.

In spite of the names he had been called Mr. Bramley-Bowkett felt that he had handled the matter in a masterly manner and could afford to smile; he did so unpleasantly. He walked quietly to the window to watch those absurd young people walk down the street. They came out of the house and walked down it under his pleased eyes. Of a sudden, it struck him that they were not wearing an air of

very bitter disappointment. They were walking briskly and laughing and John Roaker was carrying the sword as if it was his most prized possession ; he was almost dandling it.

Mr. Bramley-Bowkett stepped lightly ; indeed, he almost sprang to the sword-rack. He snatched up the Rai Kunitsugu sheath and tore the Norimitsu blade out of it. One look at the blade almost convinced him that it was indeed a genuine Norimitsu. But he made sure ; he knocked out the peg which fixed the hilt on to the handle and looked at the signature. It was the signature of Norimitsu and plainly genuine.

Then there might be seen a pleasing spectacle of a stainlessly dressed English gentleman leaping lightly about a beautiful room and turning the air blue.

CHAPTER XI

THE MYSTIC FAN

JOHAN ROAKER could find no words in which to express his immense admiration of the astuteness of Miss Timmins. It was a revelation to him that an intellect of such astuteness could be found outside the United States, and he could hardly believe it. His admiration for her was increased tenfold. He was burning to find ways of expressing it.

He began by trying to pay her six pounds commission on the sword, which was what she would have received had it been bid up to a hundred and twenty pounds. She would not hear of it; fifty-four pounds was what it was going to cost him and all the commission she would take was fifty-four shillings. But she did take the fifty-four pounds in notes from him to pay Farrington, for she thought it well to acquire merit in the eyes of that firm. Naturally, John Roaker pressed her to dine and dance with him at Thibault's that night. Since she felt that she had earned the recreation, she let him take her there. It was a pleasant evening, but it did not compare with the two evenings she had spent there with Lord Scredington. At the end of the evening he was so

depressed when she refused to dance with him next day that she relented and consented to do so.

The next morning Lord Scredington came round to ask her what was happening in the matter of the changed swords, and she told him how she had re-changed them the evening before.

He laughed and said: "You are certainly the most ingenious young lady in London. But one of these days your unscrupulous methods will get you into serious trouble. There is on the statute books of this tight little island a crime called larceny, and if the Bowkett lad liked to brazen it out, six months' hard labour, or something unpleasant of that kind, is what would happen to you."

"But he daren't brazen it out," said Miss Timmins confidently. "Besides, what I did was a perfectly fair thing to do. I was only setting the thing right."

"The law is a nasty-tempered thing, and it gets frightfully peeved if anybody sets things right but itself," he said severely. "As a matter of fact, I didn't ask you what you were going to do because I thought it probable that it would be something that I should have to stop, and I was sure that you'd be furious with me for stopping it."

"You wouldn't have stopped it!" said Miss Timmins with some heat.

"Oh, yes, I should," he said quietly.

Miss Timmins knew that he would.

He did not ask her whether she had danced with John Roaker; he said nothing about him; she did not know whether she was relieved or disappointed

that he did not, and she was careful not to go into the matter. He talked on for a while and adjured her to find him a really beautiful piece of jade or chalcedony, then went away without inviting her to dance with him one afternoon or evening at Thibault's.

This was disappointing, and when he had gone she found that she was also disappointed that he had said nothing about John Roaker. His ignoring him made her feel that he was not as much interested as she had fancied. She told herself with great firmness that it was of no importance whatever to her. But she did not enjoy the afternoon at Thibault's with John Roaker as much as she should have done, though he was evidently more delighted than ever to be with her. He told her yet more about himself, and though he was such a nice boy, she began to find the subject uninteresting. But she was quite kind to him and did not let him see it. She could see no reason why his last week in England should not be really enjoyable.

During that week Lord Scredington did not come to the shop. It did not matter to Miss Timmins at all; she told herself so more than once on the Saturday. She had given John Roaker most clearly to understand that he was not to come to the shop in the morning, for it was in the morning that Lord Scredington, as a rule, came. But she spent either the afternoon or the evening at Thibault's with him every day.

On none of those afternoons or evenings did Lord Scredington come to Thibault's.

Undoubtedly, John's last week in London was most

enjoyable, easily the most enjoyable week in his life. It was on the last evening but one that the uninvited thought came into the mind of Miss Timmins that she would cheerfully have changed the whole week with John Roaker for one afternoon with Lord Scredington. The thought annoyed her very much, and, on second thoughts she assured herself with great vehemence that she would have made no such exchange.

On the last evening the natural thing happened. John Roaker was wearing a gloomy and rather depressed air; of a sudden, between two dances, he became rather more desperate.

"Beulah, darling—" he began and stopped short, for Miss Timmins fairly jumped to the jar of the words coming from his lips, and her frown was almost a scowl.

"Don't be angry, Baby," he went on, still unfortunately, in pleading accents, laying a rather shaky hand on hers. "I can't help it. I want to take you back to the States with me. I can stay another three days, while we get hitched up. I've only to cable to Dad why I'm staying on. I want you so badly that I can't tell you how much I want you. I know that somehow, I can't tell how, we're different. But if you'll come with me you shall be a little queen in Toledo—and I'll let you help me run the business. You shall have a real say in it!"

Miss Timmins shook her head and said gently: "I'm afraid I can't come."

"Don't let your father stand in your way," he said quickly. "We'd take him with us. They'd be tickled to death with him and his knowing all

about the Brits. He'd have the loveliest time in Toledo."

"It isn't that," said Miss Timmins, "but I don't feel that way about you."

"I know you don't. You've been the sweetest little pal, and that's all there's been to it—on your side." He paused and added with a sudden anxiety: "There isn't anyone else, is there?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Timmins quickly and firmly.

"Then you come. I'll give you such a good time that you *will* feel that way about me. There isn't anything I won't do to make you feel that way about me."

Miss Timmins shook her head and said: "No, I couldn't marry a man I wasn't really fond of, and I'm not fond of you in that way."

She spoke gently, but there was a note of finality in her tone.

John Roaker heaved a long sigh that was almost a groan, and said: "I had a hunch that it was no use. But I *had* to ask you, and since there isn't anyone else, I'm not giving up hope. This has been a good trip, and it will be worth our while for me to come over again in three months from now, and then we'll see. After all, you've only known me about ten days. Next time I'll be able to see a lot more of you."

Miss Timmins let it go at that, and the hope cheered him up a little. He was less gloomy for the rest of the evening. When they parted at the door of the shop, she had not the heart to prevent him from

kissing her good-bye, but she was careful that the kiss was imprinted on her brow.

To Tom Anderson, her dancing and dining with John Roaker had been a relief. Anything, or rather, anyone, was better than Lord Scredington. Besides, as he looked at it, it was one in the eye for Lord Scredington, and to his democratic mind that was much. He told himself, with a philosophical air, and he told Mr. Timmins, and he told Miss Timmins, that she was having her fling and would settle down after a bit. The inference was that she would settle down with him. He knew his honest worth, and that honest worth always gets its cook-housekeeper.

Three days after John Roaker had gone, Lord Scredington came into the shop. He did not come straight in; he opened the door a little way and looked in; then at the sight of Beulah behind the counter, he assumed an air of glad surprise, and came in quickly.

"What?" he exclaimed. "You still here, Beulah darling?"

Miss Timmins's beautiful eyes snapped. He had not been near her for ten days, and when he did come he was like this.

"Where should I be?" she said in icy accents.

He pretended to be overcome and leant against the counter trembling, and said in a faint voice: "On your way to the States, of course. The shock of finding you still here is too much for me. The hours of anguish I have spent!"

With an air of cold indifference, not unmixed with contempt, Miss Timmins continued to polish the

pieces in an odd lot of jade she had bought in a small sale-room in a court off Chancery Lane.

"I can well understand this moroseness," he said in most sympathetic accents.

Miss Timmins did her best to remain icily unmoved; but she could not prevent her nostrils dilating a little.

"These Americans—sad fellows—sad fellows," he went on sadly, shaking his head. "And you went out with him every day—every blessed day—a disappointing lad."

Miss Timmins still preserved an icy calm, but her eyes began to sparkle.

"And there was I—eating my heart out," he went on, and sighed deeply. "But I said to myself: 'It may turn out to be Love's genuine young dream, and I will not spoil it!' Perhaps I acted unwisely; perhaps, if I had appeared upon the scene in all my youthful vigour and with my fatal beauty, I might have given him just that little go of jealousy which would have turned the trick."

Miss Timmins burned to say a few kind words about his fatal beauty, but she refrained. Only her teeth became set very tight.

"I felt it was my duty to do nothing—absolutely nothing to spoil your chance of joining the great circle of American millionaires, for that lad is bound to become a millionaire. I saw it in his eye. And I deprived myself of the few delightful evenings that brighten my barren life, all to no purpose. And I did so miss those evenings. All that happened was that he loved and rode away."

There are accusations that exasperate the sternest spirit to utterance, and this was one of them.

"He did nothing of the kind!" cried Miss Timmins, with considerable heat.

"So you are engaged to him, are you?" he said in a tone of genuine anxiety.

For a moment Miss Timmins resolved to take refuge again in a dignified silence. But there was that in his tone which caused her to say: "I'm nothing of the kind."

He sighed, and she was sure it was a sigh of relief; then he said: "You ought not to have refused him. You know quite well you ought not. It was a chance of a settlement in life that doesn't often come a girl's way." His tone was really severe; then he said gently and sympathetically: "Why did you refuse him, Beulah?"

"Oh, he was such a boy!" said Miss Timmins impatiently.

"I like that! You said he was older than I."

Miss Timmins hesitated; then she said: "Oh, you're a boy in a different way."

"A much nicer way too," he said complacently.

"Not at all," said Miss Timmins with decision.

Apparently it was a matter into which he did not care to go further, for he let it drop and began to examine the pieces of jade she was polishing.

There were three bangles of the dark green jade which comes from Sungaria, or from the country round Lake Baikal, two milky-jade cloak-hooks, a spirit-gong from a small, poor temple, and an archaic fan-handle of burnt jade. It was the fan-handle

that interested Miss Timmins, that had induced her to speculate in the lot. It was eight inches long, rather more than an inch across at its widest, from half to three-quarters of an inch thick, hexagonal, and roughly chased with emblems and blossoms. The longer she looked at it the queerer it seemed and the more she liked it.

The spirit-gong from the small, poor temple was composed of two small plaques shaped like butterflies. One, of greenish jade, was chased with the head and body and wings of a butterfly; the other, of grey jade, was plain and thin and very old—tomb jade, Miss Timmins thought. She had taken them out of the frame in which they had been suspended—a wooden frame, carved floridly in the worst Birmingham taste. They would sell better separated.

He turned over the pieces, picked up the fan-handle and said: "Hullo? What have you got here?"

"It's a fan-handle."

"So it is. I didn't spot what it was. It's rather a find, for I never saw one anything like as old as this before," he said turning it about in long, slender fingers as delicately deft to handle beautiful things as Miss Timmins's own.

"No more have I; and I really believe it's Sung," she said, in a rather doubtful tone.

"It might easily be Sung, or perhaps Yuan, or it might be even older. At any rate, I'll have it. What do you want for it? Have a heart, Beulah, darling; be reasonable. You don't know how badly the cards have been treating me lately."

"It serves you right for gambling," said Miss Timmins with cold severity.

"Always the little tigress, and never a word of sympathy from the warm heart," he said mournfully. "What do you want for it?"

"I can't tell you till I've taken it to the Museum and found out about it. I expect they'll be able to tell me there, though it is very hard to tell the age of old jade. But, anyhow, it will cost you five shillings more than it would have done. As I've told you before, I put five shillings on to the price of anything every time you call me 'Beulah, darling.' It's the only thing I can do," she said in accents a trifle vindictive.

"Oh, what a tigress! Mercenary even in moments of deep emotion," he said, yet more mournfully. "In future I shall stick to 'Baby.'"

"And that will cost you five shillings, too," she said sternly.

Mournfully, but amiably, he reproached her for her coldness and hardness of heart. Every time he did it, it rather puzzled and exasperated her, for when he spoke in that tone with those really reproachful eyes, she could never decide how much he was in earnest; whether, indeed, he was in earnest at all. If only she could have believed his accents and his eyes! But she could not. She had a strong suspicion that long practice had made them perfect—perfectly deceitful. Nevertheless, sometimes—

Then she took herself to task and told herself how silly it was.

As he was speaking to her he was picking up the

other pieces of jade and looking at them, looking more often at her. Then carelessly he fitted the thin, grey butterfly plaque, upside down, into the groove in the fan-handle so that it looked like a small fan, a tiny fan, in a very large handle. He looked at it and turned it about; then, slowly his eyes opened wide in pleased surprise.

"By Jove! We've got it this time!" he exclaimed in a tone of lively satisfaction.

"Got what?" said Miss Timmins, roused by that tone to a lively interest.

"The *Mystica Vannus Iacchi*," he said triumphantly.

"Whatever's that?" said Miss Timmins with a livelier interest.

"The Mystic Winnowing Fan of Bacchus. It's one of the things that have puzzled scholars and occultists for ages. Why was it called 'mystica' they want to know. Some scholars say it only means 'Carried in the Mysteries,' the Dionysiac Festival, you know. But the occultists won't hear of that; they say that the *Mystica Vannus* was a symbol, a very potent, wonderful symbol—one of those symbols with which you can do tremendous things, if you only know how to use them. But what this fan was, nobody knows. It has been lost for ages and ages. And now we've got the blessed thing itself—fresh from the blooming East, where Dionysus came from. Find the right occult gang, and they'll up with a packet."

A frown furrowed Miss Timmins's charming forehead; her eyes became cold; she said coldly: "But

it isn't a wonderful lost symbol. It's a fake, and I don't sell fakes."

"Always a little tigress! No joyousness! No enthusiasm!" he cried in reproachful accents. "It isn't a fake! I say it's the Mystic Fan of Dionysus, and that's what it obviously is. Look at it! What else can it be? It's a fan—at least it will be when we've cemented it together—a jade fan, thousands of years old—or thereabouts—from the Mystic East. It must be the *Mystica Vannus*. How do you know it isn't? Be reasonable, Beulah, dar—I mean Baby—be reasonable."

"You said half of it, and that will cost you half-a-crown, and the whole of 'Baby,' and that will cost you five shillings. That's twelve shillings and sixpence already," she said coldly. Then, with a faint, admiring smile, she added: "You certainly can tell the tale. But, then, I always knew you could."

"Not to you, Beu—never to you!" he protested.

"Always," she said with conviction; then she added: "But I tell you I don't have anything to do with fakes; and I won't."

"I only wanted to make your fortune," he protested. "But if you won't have a packet out of the fan, at any rate have the lark." He paused and then chanted, "Do let's have the lark, Baby—do let's have the lark."

This suggestion appealed to Miss Timmins, for, taking it by and large, she did lead a quiet life, and to her a lark seemed a pleasing thing. She needed, therefore, but little more persuasion to agree to have a lark with the occult world. She took cement from a

drawer, and they cemented the butterfly plaque into the groove of the fan-handle; Miss Timmins thoughtfully dabbed a little dust on the cement before it was dry, and so making it the colour of the butterfly plaque. When they had done with it, the fan looked to have been fixed in the handle since the handle was made.

Then Lord Scredington said: "You must take it along to the Museum and see what they make of it."

A wicked little grin wreathed her so kissable lips; but she hesitated.

Then she said hastily: "No, I won't do that. They are always so kind to me at the Museum."

"That's to your credit—not to theirs. Everybody wants to be kind to you. I do myself—often. But you only strike me," he said mournfully.

"No; I won't take it to the Museum. It wouldn't be fair," she said firmly.

"Well, I'll break my rule and step into the polite world in the afternoon for a day or two and spread the glad tidings of the finding of the *Mystica Vannus Iacchi*. And if you don't see some queer birds, I'll eat my hat."

She set the fan aside and went on polishing the other pieces in the lot. He stayed on for another half-hour, talking to her, watching her, saying amusing things and many charming things. Though she did not believe them, in spite of the corroboration of them she found in his caressing eyes, they kept her faintly and delightfully flushed. Then, with manifest reluctance, he went, and as always happened when he came round to the shop, she thought about him, with

but short intervals for other reflection, for the rest of the day.

The next morning she gave little thought to the matter of the Mystic Fan. It seemed to her quite probable that he would forget about it. But at eleven o'clock he drove up in his car and came into the shop, bringing with him a mahogany, velvet-lined, glass-lidded box with brass attachments by means of which it could be screwed down to the counter.

"This is the best thing I could do in the way of a shrine for the *Mystica Vannus Iacchi*," he said cheerfully. "At any rate, you'll be able to display it in it quite well, and no one will be able to pick it up and bolt with it. You can't trust these occult ones much further than you can throw them. They're a bit off-colour about the moral character. I've got the screws, and if you can find me a screw-driver and a gimlet, I will fix it up for you."

She found him a screw-driver and a gimlet and he screwed the box down to the counter. It was about a foot long and two and a half inches deep. He laid the Mystic Fan in it, then took from his pocket four small crystal balls, and set them at the four corners of the fan.

"Doesn't it look the very last word in the occult?" he said, with joyous satisfaction. "It's any odds that some of these people will try to steal it, if you go on obstinately refusing to sell it to them. So you'd better go straight off and insure it for an untidy sum."

"It does look awfully it," she said with real

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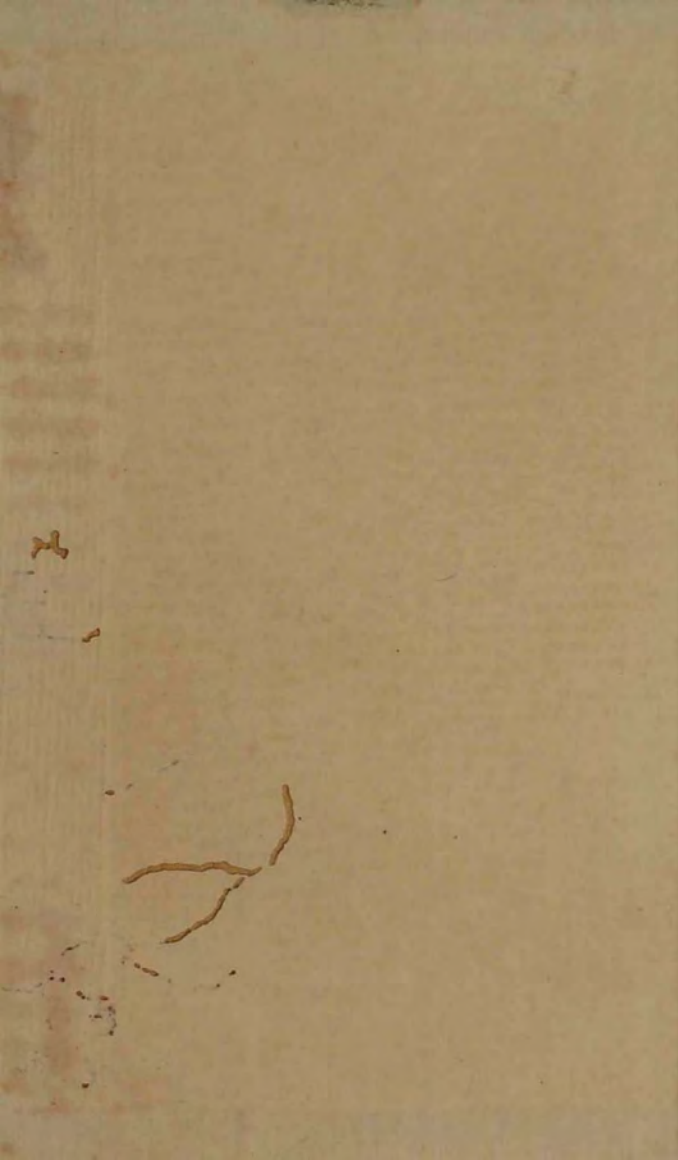
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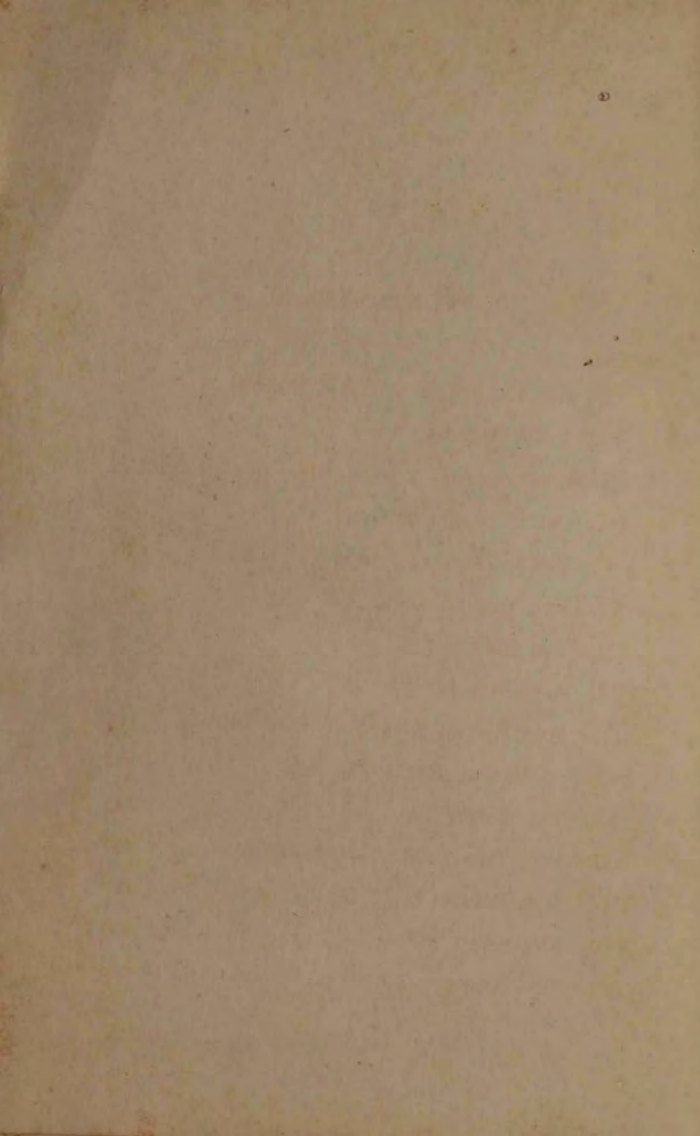
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admiration. "You certainly do have lovely ideas. You'd make your fortune in this business—if you kept honest."

"Praise at last—qualified, but praise," he said in a tone of perhaps exaggerated pleasure. "But how many times have I gone down on my knees and begged you to let me put money into this business and move you into a shop in Piccadilly, where we could both make our fortunes, selling only top-hole things?"

Miss Timmins looked at him queerly and said soberly: "No; I won't let you put money into this business. You're bad enough as it is."

"Cryptic—cryptic," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "And I the most innocent creature in the world. But I have no time now to prove to you that your distrust is entirely unwarranted, for I must be off before the initiates arrive. Those of them who enjoy the felicity of knowing me, can't be persuaded that for me life is really real and earnest. But you might try to remember as much as you can of what they say. Sometimes it's so beautifully imbecile. But be sure you keep the Mystic Fan locked up, or one of them will bone it and bolt. Tell them that if it's touched, it will lose its virtue."

"But I shall have to give some reason for not selling it," said Miss Timmins, with a rather troubled air. "And I can't think what I'd better say."

He hesitated, considering the matter, then he said: "Oh, tell them that if anyone buys it, it loses its virtue and is of no use whatever to them. Tell them that it has to be given or stolen to be of any use. That ought to stump them all right."

There came a sudden glint in his eyes, and he made a grab at her. Miss Timmins had seen the glint and recognised it; she jumped back out of reach.

“The most distrustful person I ever set eyes on,” he said reproachfully. “Good-bye, darling—there’s no charge for darling without the Beulah—good luck.”

CHAPTER XII

MISS TIMMINS MEETS THE INITIATES

WITH rather wistful eyes Miss Timmins watched Lord Scredington cross the pavement and step into his car and drive off. Then she locked the box that held the Mystic Fan and put the key in her pocket. If people came to see it, and he had been confident that they would, she thought it likely that some of them would ask her if she had anything else of the same kind. Therefore, she looked through the drawers and the cabinets and found five jade charms, three of milky, one of greenish, and one, very old, of brownish jade.

She was not long learning that Lord Scredington had been right, that his incursion into the polite world was already bearing fruit, for at half-past twelve an expensively dressed lady, wearing a green hat too young for her, and removable hair, with enamelled cheeks and very dark rings under her tired and sunken eyes, came into the shop. On her fingers were rings of strange shapes, set with strange gems, endowed with strange properties. She wore the rather dreadful air of a Sibyl with a past, in process of rejuvenation.

She looked round the shop and her eyelids rose a little; then, in a tired and husky voice, she said: "Good-morning. I am told that you have a jade fan. I should like to see it."

Miss Timmins waved her hand towards the box. She was not going to call the occult object in it a fan.

The lady raised her tortoiseshell lorgnette and bent down over the box, and her tired eyes glittered as she studied the emblems on the chased fan-handle.

Then she said, in hushed, awed accents: "It is indeed. It is undoubtedly the *Mystica Vannus*—the lost symbol. Astonishing—astonishing! to find it in a little shop in an obscure and dirty street in the very heart of London!"

This description of the shop and its surroundings quite failed to win Miss Timmins's heart, for it was her perpetual grievance that the shop was little and Devonshire Street obscure and dirty. Therefore, when the lady asked her, after trying to open the box and finding it locked, to take the fan out of it that she might examine it more closely, she said in a much colder tone than she need have used that that was impossible, for she had been told if anybody handled it, it would lose its virtue.

"You're right—quite right," said the lady in ready agreement. "It should be handled only by initiates, and that only after due preparation. But it would be quite safe to handle it with a piece of silk, for even electricity, as you know, cannot pass through silk. But that doesn't matter, for I'm going to buy it—box and crystal balls and all. How much are you asking for it?"

"It isn't for sale," said Miss Timmins coldly.

The lady started; then with an air of immense disappointment, and even more huskily, she said: "But why isn't it for sale? What are you keeping it for? What do you propose to do with it?"

Miss Timmins hesitated. She could not very well say that she was keeping it for a lark. Therefore, she assumed an air of mystery and said:

"I'm afraid it isn't for sale."

The lady, who had taken very little notice of Miss Timmins, looked at her with sudden interest and said: "Are you one of us?"

Then, very quickly she made a sign which Miss Timmins did not catch.

"No," said Miss Timmins coldly.

The lady looked at her with calculating eyes, then she said: "It's all nonsense, you're not wanting to sell it. I'll give you twenty-five pounds for it."

"It really isn't for sale," said Miss Timmins, more coldly.

"Thirty-five," said the lady.

Miss Timmins shook her head.

"Fifty pounds," said the lady.

Miss Timmins again said "No." But how she did wish that the fan was genuine, or that she could persuade herself to sell a fake. It went to her heart to refuse fifty pounds for two pieces of jade which had not cost her fifty shillings. But not for a moment did she think of accepting it.

"But it's really nonsense," said the lady; her temper had gone; her eyes were sparkling fiercely;

could she have flushed through the enamel, her face would have undoubtedly been a reddish-purple.

Then the gentleman of sixty came into the shop, an expensively dressed gentleman of sixty, plump, with protruding, rather glassy eyes, grey hair that hung down below his collar, and a face of a pinkness uncommon in a man of his years. His steps were short and rather mincing and he carried an ebony cane, on the top of which was an ivory death's-head. It was much too long for him.

He started slightly at the sight of the lady, and his face showed no pleasure and his piping voice had no warmth in it as he said: "How do you do, Lady Stairforth? The early bird—what? The early bird." He stepped quickly up to the counter and his eyes brightened when he saw the Mystic Fan in the box. "But the worm—ah, yes—the worm is still here." He looked at her with challenging eyes and said: "Do we combine to acquire it, or do we fight for it?"

"It's no use our doing either, Mr. Gregory, for it isn't to be acquired," said Lady Stairforth sourly. "The young woman says it isn't for sale, and she has refused a very good price for it."

"Not for sale? Everything is for sale," piped Mr. Gregory sententiously. "It's merely a question of price, and you haven't offered enough. Let's have a look at it."

He bent down over the box and examined the fan even more carefully than the lady had done. His protruding eyes were gleaming brightly with eagerness when he asked to be allowed to examine it more closely. He accepted Miss Timmins's refusal to take

it out of the box, lest handling should rob it of its virtue, without protest.

But with an expression of rather shifty cunning he said: "I see that someone who knows has been telling you things about it. But did they tell you that it is an extraordinary dangerous thing to have, that it is practically certain to bring misfortune and disaster to those who do not know how to treat it?"

"It doesn't look very dangerous," said Miss Timmins, unmoved. "Besides the crystal balls would avert any evil influence if it had any. That's what they're there for."

"That's *one* of the things they're there for," piped Mr. Gregory solemnly; then he looked at Miss Timmins with eyes that he strove, vainly, to make piercing, and added: "So you know things, do you?"

"I know what I know," said Miss Timmins darkly, accommodating herself, not unsuccessfully, to her company.

"You're quite sure it's genuine, then, Mr. Gregory?" Lady Stairforth broke in.

"I'm not only sure that it's genuine, but I am quite sure that it's the only one in Europe. What's more, I shouldn't be surprised if it was the only one in the world, except in the occult fastnesses in the desert of Gobi and in Tibet," piped Mr. Gregory solemnly. He turned to Miss Timmins and added: "And how did it come into your possession?"

"I bought it at a sale—not a sale of any importance. I didn't know what it was; but a friend of mine tells me that it's the Mystic Fan of Dionysus," said Miss Timmins. "I don't say that it is."

"I tell you it *is*," piped Mr. Gregory in a dictatorial manner. "How much do you want for it?"

Again Miss Timmins said that it was not for sale.

"Oh, nonsense! Nonsense! Of course you're going to sell it. What do you buy things at sales for, except to sell them? What about fifty pounds?" said Mr. Gregory, hectoring.

Miss Timmins shook her head and again said that it was not for sale. Mr. Gregory became much more urgent with her than Lady Stairforth had been; his offers rose to a hundred pounds. For about the eighth time Miss Timmins said "No."

Then the gentleman who looked like a goat came in.

Thanks to the narrowness of his long face and to the fact that his long nose drooped almost to his pointed beard, and that his soft hat, pushed back, left uncovered two little tufts of hair, curled into the semblance of budding horns, the resemblance was astonishing. Those who knew that it was his pride to be known in his esoteric circle as the Goat of Mendés, were less astonished by it than those who saw him for the first time.

"Ah, my good friends, Lady Stairforth and Augustus. The first arrivals, hein? Keen on the scent—very keen, hein? But this time you haven't been quick enough, for I am here and the *Mystica Vannus* must come to me—the Master!" he said in a thin, jeering voice with a foreign accent, and smiled at them maliciously, raised his head and laughed.

It was exactly and deliberately a short bleat of a goat.

Lady Stairforth and Augustus Gregory seemed to

cringe before him. He came forward with curiously mincing, almost dancing, steps and bent over the box. His two friends scowled at him almost unamiably. Miss Timmins smiled; only her excellent manners prevented her from laughing. He seemed to her, in her exoteric ignorance, rather funny than impressive.

He must have taken it for a timid smile, for he bestowed a leer of quite uncommon fascination on her and asked her the price of the Mystic Fan. Once more she said that it was not for sale, and he bleated feebly and said that she was joking. She made it clear to him that she was not joking. Then, realising that he was a foreigner, she repeated the declaration in a good loud voice that he might understand it better.

An expression of childish dismay filled his long face from top to bottom. He looked like a young and not very robust goat whom a perfect stranger had kicked on the left ham.

"But why—why won't you sell it to me?" he asked plaintively.

"If you know about these things you ought to know," said Miss Timmins a trifle harshly. "My friend, who does know about these things, told me that if you bought it, like I did, it isn't of any use to you at all. It has to be given or stolen."

"Ah, your friend has the secret knowledge, then?" said the Goat of Mendés quickly.

Miss Timmins did not say that Lord Seredington had the secret knowledge, she did not say that he had not. She thought it quite improbable.

But she was not going to commit herself, and she only said: "That's what he told me."

"But what on earth are you keeping it *for*?" broke in Augustus Gregory, sharply.

"To bring customers to the shop, of course," said Miss Timmins with a note of irritation in her tone.

The lark was not such a great lark. It had become rather tiresome.

Baffled, they frowned on her, then turned to examine and discuss the Mystic Fan. They talked at length about the emblems engraved on the handle, they disputed about the crystal balls. The Goat of Mendés maintained that they were protective, keeping the dangerous emanation from passing through the wooden sides of the box and injuring those who came near it; Augustus Gregory maintained that they kept the Fan at the full height of its virtue. Then they turned to Miss Timmins and surveyed her with unhappy, wistful eyes.

She assumed an unbending, inexorable air, for she had had enough of them.

"Of course, we cannot steal it; and she will not give it to us," said the Goat of Mendés in incredibly mournful accents.

The face of Augustus Gregory grew suddenly bright with a happy idea; he slapped the counter and exclaimed: "I've got it! The very thing! There's nothing to prevent us hiring it from her—just for the Ceremonies."

For a moment this seemed fair to Miss Timmins, and she hesitated; then she saw quite clearly that

to hire out a fake was just as bad as selling it, and she said hastily: "No. There can't be any question of money about it at all. I'm not taking money either to sell it or to hire it out."

She spoke in a tone of finality, and they gazed at her yet more unhappily.

Then Lady Stairforth said angrily: "Ah, I see what it is; you are one of us! But you won't admit it!"

"Yes; she has the knowledge. I perceive it clearly," said the Goat of Mendés with solemn conviction. "She knows more about the *Mystica Vannus* than even I do. I do not know the tradition of this one—no. Doubtless, it has come to us through the Rosicrucians. But it is a matter to arrange. Mademoiselle shall impart her secrets to me, for we of the secret knowledge are brethren—every one. Also we will pay her—well."

"But I haven't got any secrets," Miss Timmins protested quickly.

The Goat of Mendés shrugged his shoulders with an unbelieving smile and said: "The holders of the secrets are always dumb." Then he turned to the others and added hopefully: "We shall find a way to persuade Mademoiselle to tell us the things she knows. We shall make her our friend. I will do so, and you shall do what you can. Then she will tell us all."

Miss Timmins protested that she had nothing to tell them; but she protested with no great violence. She could not find it in her heart to refuse the friendship of manifestly harmless, expensively dressed

people who might become good customers. Why discourage them?

Her instinct was right. They became customers at once. It was to Lady Stairforth that the happy thought came to ask Miss Timmins if she had anything else like the Mystic Fan.

"I have some jade charms, and two of them are old," said Miss Timmins.

"Let's see them," said Lady Stairforth eagerly.

"Yes, yes," said the Goat of Mendés.

Miss Timmins took the five jade charms, which were to hand in the drawer under the counter, and at once Lady Stairforth pounced on the small, roughly carved animal of brownish jade. Miss Timmins had been unable to make up her mind whether it was a boar, or a tiger, or a cat.

"It's the Red Mouse! The Red Mouse of Berkaial!" cried Lady Stairforth, immensely excited.

"That's what it probably is," piped Augustus Gregory solemnly.

The Goat of Mendés was not at once persuaded of this, and there was an animated discussion, not conducted without heat, about the possibility of the Red Mouse of Berkaial, who was one of the devils of the Cabala, having found its way to China. In the end it was decided that the devils were cosmopolitans, and it might have done so.

Finding that it was of this extraordinary interest, Miss Timmins sold it to Lady Stairforth for ten pounds; she gathered that the purchaser was strongly of the opinion that the Red Mouse of Berkaial would be uncommonly useful at baccarat. Then,

begging Miss Timmins to give her earnest consideration to the pressing matter of shortly imparting her quota of the secret knowledge to them, they took their leave of her with many flattering expressions of esteem and of their desire to make her better acquaintance.

During the day four more ladies, expensively dressed, a thin and jaded young man, a stout and dull young man, and a dyspeptic-looking man of middle age came to try to buy the Mystic Fan. Two of the ladies, so spoilt that they must have been rich indeed, made the mistake of being uncivil to Miss Timmins when she refused to sell it. Both of them found that with very little effort Miss Timmins could be rather more uncivil than they were, without departing from the strict truth about their manners, their age, and their appearance. Both of the other ladies bought a jade charm. All these initiates belonged to the leisured class and five of the seven were gentlefolk. There came also a stout female palmist, in a coney-seal coat and a pre-war hat, who thought that the Mystic Fan might prove useful to her in her business, and a male amateur psychometrist, richly bearded, who wished to psychometrise it.

Miss Timmins allowed him to do what he could through the glass lid of the box. It was not much.

In the evening, as she was closing the shop, Lord Seredington came to learn how she had fared. She expressed her extreme pleasure at the fact that the Mystic Fan had sold jade charms for her to the tune of eighteen pounds ten shillings. Then she told him at length about the three visitors of the morning and

their conversation and the resolution they had formed to become better acquainted with her.

He laughed joyfully and said: "The Goat of Mendés! I might have known that he would come browsing round! Did you ever see anything like it, I ask you?"

"I never did, and I never want to see anyone like him again," said Miss Timmins with plainly sincere conviction. "He seemed to be a goat on purpose."

"That's just what he is—and a goat by nature, as well—one of the silly ones. He calls himself Baron Gilles Desforêts. But I should think he was christened something much less occult. There's no doubt about it; you've certainly made three worthy friends, and as long as you have the *Mystica Vannus*, you'll see a good deal of them. In fact, you'll see them nearly every day, for they'll never rest till they get it off you."

"Then they never *will* rest," said Miss Timmins with quiet certainty.

As usual, she had been on her guard when he arrived, the guard she so watchfully maintained in his society, but insensibly she had relaxed from it. Carelessly, she came one step outside the counter, which she had been, almost unconsciously, keeping between them. On the instant, his strong hands had gripped her; he lifted her off her feet and kissed her. As he loosed her, she got in a nasty right hook on the side of his head. Then she rubbed her knuckles with an uncommonly rueful air.

Lord Scredington laughed triumphantly, and triumphantly he said: "If you'd hit me anywhere else,

you'd have hurt me. But this"—he tapped his head—"is solid. And mind you don't go and stick a hundred pounds on to the next thing you sell me for finding it out."

Miss Timmins did not express in words the contempt and loathing with which the colossal cheek of this dastardly action had filled her; she did her best to look it. But she was so prettily flushed that she hardly got it across.

Then he assumed an expression of the bitterest remorse and apologised at length, protesting that he had been quite unable to help it. Then, since Miss Timmins had become dumb and apparently unable to see him, he took his leave.

Soon after breakfast the next morning, leaving her father in charge of the shop, Miss Timmins paid visits to several dealers of her acquaintance and procured eight more small jade charms at a reasonable price. Only four of the initiates, fresh ones, that is, ladies who had seen more summers, to say nothing of the winters, than was satisfactory to them, came during the course of the day to buy the Mystic Fan. The word must have been passed round that she was inexorably resolved not to sell it. To two of them she sold a jade charm—for rather more, it is to be feared, than she had paid for the eight.

In the middle of the afternoon the Goat of Mendés came in. He was affable to her, even fascinating, though not with a fascination that moved her. He invited her to come the next evening to his house in Sloane Street to meet half a dozen initiates and discuss what was to be done in the matter of the

Mystic Fan. Miss Timmins liked him less than she had liked him the day before; she found that she had a distinct physical repulsion from him, less strong than that inspired into her by a black-beetle, but strong enough. Therefore, she said that she could not see that anything could be done in the matter of the Mystic Fan, and with great politeness refused the invitation. He said that he would send Mr. Gregory to talk to her, and went away.

It was just as she was about to close the shop for the night that the portly gentleman came into it. He was portly and tall and dignified, with curiously dull eyes, soft of voice, and suave of manner. He moved quietly about the shop and asked the price of a Satsuma teapot, an alabaster Buddha, a bamboo Shou Lao. Miss Timmins, used to this time-old ruse of customers to disguise their eagerness to possess themselves of one particular thing, wondered what he did want; she had an idea.

Then apparently his eye fell on the Mystic Fan in its box on the counter.

"What's that?" he asked in a casual tone.

That casualness might have deceived a man, but it did not deceive Miss Timmins. His tone was just a trifle too casual in the face of so uncommon an object. He *had* come for the fan.

She did not tell him what it was; she would not call it a fan; she said in a tone no less casual than his own: "Oh, that isn't for sale."

"Not for sale?" he said sharply. "Then what's it doing here?"

"Oh, it's a curious thing, and the people who are

interested in that kind of thing come to look at it, and sometimes they buy something else," she said carelessly.

"Well, *I* don't want to look at it. I want to buy it. How much do you want for it?" he said blandly, but firmly.

"I tell you it isn't for sale," said Miss Timmins as firmly.

In a rising voice that grew rather hectoring, he said: "All that means is that you're keeping it till some customer comes along from whom you can extract an extravagant price. But I'm willing to pay a good price for it myself and I want it."

"But you can't have it," she said more firmly.

"But I'm going to have it," he said in really hectoring accents. "You're going to sell it to me. If it wasn't for sale, you had no business whatever to expose it for sale. I am going to buy it."

He stood with his hands on the counter, bending forward and suddenly glowering at her. He seemed to have grown bigger and his curious, dull eyes were now bright and curiously piercing; they seemed to be boring into her. She had a feeling that he was growing all eyes; she was, in some odd way, conscious that he was putting forth a tremendous, overbearing force to get his way. He kept on repeating with an increasing urgency: "*I am* going to buy it. *You are* going to sell it to me."

"You can't have it. It isn't for sale," she said much less firmly, almost weakly, indeed.

"But it is—it is—I tell you it is," he urged. "You

want to sell it to me—you know you want to sell it to me.”

She did not want to sell it to him; but she was conscious of an immense desire to be rid of him; of the oppression of his eyes and voice. She could only shake her head.

Holding her still with his eyes, he told her once more in a louder voice, and yet more insistently, that the fan was for sale, that that was what it was there for, that she wanted to sell it to him. He bade her take it out of the box and give it to him at once.

“Give it to me—give it to me—give it to me,” he reiterated.

So overwhelming was his urging, so compelling were his eyes, which were now no more than points of bright light to her, that, dazed, she was actually putting her hand in her pocket for the key of the box, when she saw Lord Scredington come quietly through the door of the shop.

He stood still, taking in what was happening and grasped the effect of the portly gentleman’s “Give it to me—give it to me—give it to me!” Then, his lips wreathed with a very disagreeable smile; he came lightly forward and in the manner of a policeman, laid his hand heavily on the portly gentleman’s left shoulder.

The phrase died suddenly on the portly gentleman’s lips; the force seemed almost to rush out of him. The colour seemed to be suddenly sucked out of his face, darkly flushed by his efforts; he just sagged. He seemed unable to look round and loudly swallowed a great lump in his throat.

"What's all this, Mr. Harris? What do you think you're doing?" said Lord Scredington, and his usually charming voice was harsh and compelling.

The portly gentleman whipped round with his teeth bare and said in a snarling stutter: "What d—d—do you mean b—b—by laying your hand on m—m—me?"

Lord Scredington looked as if he had never been debonair in his life and said in a chilly voice: "In about ten seconds I shall be laying my knuckles on you, good and hard, you fat bully. Clear out!"

Miss Timmins was staring at him with parted lips; it seemed to her that, quiet though he was, he was putting forth ever so much more force than the portly gentleman had done.

The portly gentleman looked at him and blinked, pulled himself together, turned and burst into a storm of voluble, loud protest. But as he protested, he went, and the door of the shop banged behind him.

Miss Timmins leant forward over the counter, trembling violently and breathing quickly, almost panting. Lord Scredington swung himself over it and, sitting on it, lifted her on to his knee, hugged her gently, and kissed her.

"It's all right—quite all right," he said in the gentlest voice, and kissed her again.

Miss Timmins began to cry, and for about three minutes she cried violently. Then she was horribly ashamed of herself. It was such a silly thing to do! She slipped out of his arms and stood, leaning against the wall, dabbing furiously at her eyes with a tiny pocket-handkerchief.

Lord Scredington showed himself to be a man of experience. He swung himself back over the counter, found his way to the kitchen and brought her a glass of water. She drank a third of it and recovered her serenity, though she was still trembling.

"That's better," he said in a comforting tone; then he added gravely: "But we've got to stop this fan racket. I'd no idea that that brute Harris was in London, or I doubt that I'd ever have started it—at any rate, with you in it."

Miss Timmins almost banged the glass down on the counter, and said fiercely: "I won't stop it! I won't! I won't be bullied!"

CHAPTER XIII

MISS TIMMINS LOSES THE MYSTIC FAN

LORD SCREDINGTON was rather taken aback by her fierceness; then he said: "But the brute's dangerous, I tell you, and he's the chief of a really dangerous crowd. The Vampire was one of the mildest members of it."

"I don't care," said Miss Timmins with unabated fierceness.

"Well, well, there are points about being a little tigress after all," he said, smiling at her. "I like your spirit. But all the same, I'm going to take care of the fan for you. If it isn't here, they can't do anything, and there's no point in their trying to do anything. But if it's safe with me, you can wait in peace for the offers Baron Gilles Desforêts and his friends will make you. They'll make offers and offers, and they may make one you can accept."

For a while the angry Miss Timmins, angry chiefly with herself for crying, refused to let him keep the fan for her; but in the end she let him have his way.

He begged her to put on an evening frock and come to dine at Thibault's with him. He said that a good dinner and some dancing would sooth her nerves as

nothing else could. But Miss Timmins was far too angry with herself to accept the invitation, and he went sadly away. The next morning she awoke in a gloomy mood. She could not forgive herself for having cried in that silly way. It was a pleasure to her to tell three excited initiates that the fan was no longer there. One of them thought to ask if she had anything else of a like nature, and Miss Timmins sold her a jade charm. That one went away fairly contented.

During the next three days, seven more initiates called to see the fan; disappointed, they went away in a moderate gloom. Miss Timmins kept her eyes open for an initiate sent to spy out the land by that portly ruffian, Mr. Harris. She was sure that he would send one. Her suspicion fell on a curiously pale, curiously quiet, almost lifeless lady, dressed in black with a costly simplicity that roused in her no little envy. On learning that the fan was not only no longer to be seen, but not even in Devonshire Street, that lady lost her lifelessness and became almost as peremptory in her demands to know where it was as Mr. Harris himself had been in demanding that it should be sold to him. The lady did not learn where it was and went away scowling.

Then, on the fourth day, came Augustus Gregory, smiling with satisfaction in the manner of one who has solved a knotty problem.

He greeted Miss Timmins with affectionate warmth, holding her hand after he had shaken it, and said: "My friends and I have been considering the matter of the Mystic Fan carefully, and we realise that the Master who told you that any monetary transaction

would cause it to lose its virtue, was right. The only way out of the difficulty seems to be that you should lend it to us and bring it yourself to the house in the country where we celebrate the rites of Dionysus."

"But why should I take all that trouble? I don't want to have anything to do with the rites of Dionysus," said Miss Timmins quickly. "They wouldn't interest me."

"They would," said Augustus Gregory quickly. "But it's just the fact that you would have to take that trouble that makes it all right, for we shouldn't pay you for lending us the fan but for your trouble in bringing it. We should want it for about eight hours, but we should want it at night and, as I say, in the country, so that you would have to sleep in the house at which we celebrate the rites, and for that we should pay you a fee. Therefore, you see, there would be no monetary transaction that actually touched the fan itself. We would pay you a fee of ten guineas for your time and trouble, and of course we should send a car for you and send you back home in it."

To Miss Timmins ten guineas seemed to be a very fair fee for spending a night in the country. But she did not close with the offer at once. These were queer people; it might not be safe to spend a night in the country with them. She had better consult Lord Scredington and do as he told her. He knew them. Therefore, she thanked Augustus Gregory for his offer and said that she would think it over and let him know.

"I do hope you'll see eye to eye with us in this

matter," he said in plaintively anxious accents. "What a pity it is that you are not one of us—an initiate yourself. Have you never craved to pierce the veil?"

"Never!" said Miss Timmins hastily. "I don't think I should like it. The gentleman who looks like—well, like a goat, you know—."

She ended in a tone of apology.

Augustus Gregory's face fell, and he said mournfully: "It's strange—very strange how few people seem to take to the Baron."

To Miss Timmins it did not seem strange at all; but she did not say so.

After begging her to let him know her decision soon, he took his leave. She rang up Lord Scredington and told him about Augustus Gregory's offer. He said that it was not a matter that could be decided on the spur of the moment and that he would come and discuss it with her. Twenty minutes later he came, and she perceived that his better self was uppermost, for he addressed her neither as "Beulah, darling" nor as "Baby," and showed himself relieved to hear that she was none the worse for Mr. Harris's bullying.

Then he said: "I don't see any harm in your accepting the offer of these people; they're quite harmless and would never dream of forcing you to join in these rites of theirs, if you don't want to."

She was relieved to hear this, for Augustus Gregory and his friends had looked to her too queer to be harmless; but she said a trifle unhappily: "All the same, I don't like taking their money."

"Don't let that worry you. They'll get their

money's worth out of the fan all right," he said, with profound conviction. "The fact that it's on the altar, or wherever they put it, is all they need to help them enormously to get into a state to see Dionysus and the Bacchantes and satyrs and fauns and leopards—or is it tigers?—and goats and the whole Bacchanalian rout. Besides you don't know what properties that little jade plaque mayn't possess. As part of a spirit-gong, it has been mixed up with devil-worship for the last thousand years and longer. It ought to be a first-class ju-ju. You're bound to give the poor little thing a chance to get back to its proper work. And these blessed initiates may get some surprising results, two or three dozen Chinese devils mixing with the Bacchanalian rout! It wouldn't be fair to rob them for a paltry ten guineas."

Miss Timmins was persuaded and told him she would let them have it. He lingered on, talking to her and gratified her curiosity to know more about Mr. Harris. That portly gentleman had for many years played a leading part in London occultism, and if half the tales about him were true, he was an uncommonly dangerous person. Lord Scredington did not think that there was any chance that he would be taking part in the celebration of the rites of Dionysus, for he was out of favour with the London occultists, many of whom asserted that he used his occult powers for base purposes, and at any rate, the Baron Gilles Desforêts was by way of being a rival at the head of another group. This was a considerable relief to her and made the prospect of spending a night in occult circles far more pleasant.

That evening she wrote to Augustus Gregory to tell him that she accepted his offer. The next morning he was at the shop at a few minutes past ten to make the arrangements. On the next Monday evening a car would call for her at eight o'clock, and it would bring her back home by eleven on Tuesday morning.

On the Monday afternoon Lord Scredington brought the fan, and at eight o'clock a large Bentley, driven by a most respectable, middle-aged chauffeur, called for her at eight o'clock. She was driven along the Birmingham Road, through Watford, to a small town she did not know a few miles beyond it, then away to the left, along country lanes, to a great house in the middle of a great park.

Evidently, the servants had been sent away, for Augustus Gregory himself opened the door of the house and in a twittering excitement led her to a small suite of rooms in the left wing. Supper was laid for her on a table in the sitting-room; on a tray on a side table was her breakfast for the next morning. He told her that she would find hot water in the bathroom, and also a large spirit-stove and kettle to boil it. He was anxious to be assured that she had everything she wanted and would be quite comfortable, and on receiving that assurance, took the fan in its box with him and left her. She locked the door of the suite, for though Lord Scredington had had no fears for her safety, there was nothing like being on the safe side.

She was not hungry yet, and she opened the window wide, enjoying the fragrant air that flowed in, laden with

the scent of the flowers in the great gardens. It was already growing dark, and she saw more than twenty big, quietly-running cars come up the drive and leave their passengers and go away. When the last of them had gone, she got to her supper, and an admirable supper it was, composed almost entirely of the light delicacies that appealed to her girlish palate, and a small bottle of Château Yquem that tasted to her like liquid sunshine. She drank a full glass of it. She had just finished when there broke on the air a furious roaring, very startling, that she could not place. It was not the roaring of an animal; it was too sustained. It stopped as suddenly as it had begun; then came the sound of a man's voice, raised chanting, in a prayer or an incantation. The celebration of the rites had begun.

Presently, the sound of many voices chanting together broke in upon the incantation of the celebrant and there followed a litany in which the sonorous voice of the celebrant paused at intervals in the incantation that the chorus of worshippers might support and strengthen it.

Pleasantly bemused by the wine she had drunk, she sat at the window listening, trying to catch the meaning of his incantation, but failing to do so, and presently a wilder note came into the chanting; the voice of the celebrant grew louder and more urgent; now and again the other worshippers raised their voices in a shout. She began to thrill faintly. Slowly the wild note grew wilder; the shouting became louder; the fragrance of incense mingled with the fragrance of the flowers in the air that flowed into

the room. She found herself thrilling and thrilling keenly to a strange appeal, till at last, almost in an intoxication, she rose and walked slowly to the door, an impulse on her to get to the celebration of the rites.

At the door she took hold of herself; she must not do anything so dangerous; the sense that it was dangerous was strong. She turned and went quickly to the window and shut it. Then she went through the bathroom to the bedroom. It was at the back of the house and the sound of the celebration of the rites came to it very faintly. She could even have the window open. She made haste to get to bed, but she was a long while getting to sleep.

In the middle of the night she awoke to hear such a yelling and shrieking that she could only infer that two or three dozen Chinese devils had indeed joined the Bacchanalian rout.

Again she was some time getting to sleep. When she awoke again, the sun was shining and the birds were singing. It was half-past seven. She did not wish to lose the morning hours in the country. She rose and had a hot bath and boiled the kettle and made delicious coffee and breakfasted. Then she went down into the lovely gardens. The gardeners were at work in them, as if nothing out of the common were toward, though all the blinds in the house were still drawn. She learned from one of them that the house was Sarrat Grange. At half-past nine she went back to her sitting-room. Half-an-hour later Augustus Gregory came to tell her that the car was ready to take her back to London. He had brought the fan

with him and gave it to her. He looked dilapidated, but wanly happy.

"Did it work all right?" she asked him a little anxiously.

She had every reason to believe that something had worked.

"It was wonderful—wonderful!" he said in a tone of awe. "How a symbol of such potency was lost, we cannot conceive. It must have been known only to the Masters and used by them only in the most secret rites. My theory is that this *Mystica Vannus* belonged to a Master who died suddenly by some accident before he could pass it on to another, and that it fell into the hands of ignorant people and remained in them till you found it. Your discovering it is the most important thing that has happened in the occult world since the message of Abremelin the Mage. Its powers are amazing—simply amazing. We got results beyond anything we had dreamed of—astonishing results!"

It seemed to Miss Timmins that they had done him very little good, and that it would be several days, probably a week, before he recovered from them. But it was a relief to her to learn that the Mystic Fan, fake or no fake, had worked and that her clients had had their money's worth. She took her ten guineas with an easy mind.

She had a pleasant drive home and when she reached it, she found Lord Scredington in the shop discussing with her father with amiable interest the question whether the Irish were, or were not, one of the lost tribes of Israel. He greeted her with an air of relief.

"I'm glad you're back to time," he said. "It would have been difficult to decide how long to give you before I drove down to Sarrat Grange to ask what had become of you."

"You knew that I was going to Sarrat Grange?" she cried in some astonishment.

"I didn't know till I saw the car that came for you drive through the lodge gates of it," he said cheerfully.

"You mean to say you followed it?" she asked, almost unable to believe her ears.

"Well, you see, I rather had to," he said. "It suddenly occurred to me about half-past seven last night that you'd never have gone unless I'd told you that it was safe. So I felt rather responsible, and I had at least to know where they were taking you."

"That was very nice of you," she said gratefully; but she was considerably surprised; she had not supposed him capable of anxiety about anyone but himself. Then she wished that he had not taken all that trouble; she did not wish to feel too much obliged to him.

"Well, and how did it go?" he said. "Did you join in the celebration of the rites?"

"I did not," she said quickly and with emphasis. "They did not sound at all nice rites to be mixed up in. At the end they seemed to be simply raging. It really did sound as if there were devils with them."

She went on to describe the rites to him as she had heard them from her rooms at Sarrat Grange.

"It was the little jade plaque that did it," he said with cheerful conviction. "I told you it must be

first-class ju-ju after all those hundreds of years among the devils."

"You don't really believe that?" she said doubtfully.

"Well, if it isn't that—and it always may be—it is that the whole bag of tricks, the bull-roarer and the incense and the chanting and incantations, worked in a truly terrifying manner, and you had Eastern and Western devils introduced into your immediate neighbourhood. The fee is yours, all of it. I wouldn't touch a penny of it!"

"You ought to have half of it—you ought to, really," she protested earnestly.

"No," he said firmly. "But I tell you what: you might come and dine and dance with me at Thibault's to-morrow night."

Miss Timmins hesitated. She was beginning to doubt that it was quite safe to go to Thibault's often. She enjoyed it too much when she was with him, as she had learned from going there with John Roaker. But he did, indeed, deserve a reward for his happy invention; therefore, she accepted the invitation. He took the Mystic Fan away with him that it might bring no fresh dangers on her.

At dinner she learnt from her father that Tom Anderson had been round the night before, and had been surprised to learn that she had gone out of London for the night and that Mr. Timmins did not know where she had gone. She was not surprised when Tom Anderson came again that evening and tried to learn where she had been. She made no secret of the fact that it was no business of his, and

then said that she had gone into the country on business and had made ten guineas. Tom remained rather gloomy and appeared dissatisfied. Mr. Timmins said that it was really wonderful how good a saleswoman Beulah was becoming, that she had paid off all the bills he owed and bought some really fine pieces for the shop and still left him a larger balance at his bank than he had had for years.

Tom's face grew brighter; she would inherit the business, and it promised to be a very good business. Miss Timmins happened to be looking at Mr. Kettleby when her father revealed these pleasing facts and she saw his look of surprise and then the greedy look which followed it. But he made no comment on this prosperity, only a few statements about the modern girl, all of them unfavourable and apparently from his heart. Several times during the course of the evening she saw him looking at her father with that greedy eye. She made up her mind that he meant to bite Mr. Timmins's ear the first time he had the chance. Therefore, before going to bed, she charged Mr. Timmins with some vigour not to have his ear bitten. He resented the suggestion and declared that Mr. Kettleby, one of the soundest Brits of his acquaintance, would never dream of doing anything of the kind, for he was a man of the noblest disposition.

Miss Timmins did not deny this. She said: "That's all right, Dad. But mind you don't lend him any money."

The next night she danced with Lord Scredington at Thibault's and spent a delightful evening. As

always, when she was his guest, he treated her with the greatest respect.

On the Thursday morning Mr. Gregory came into the shop to ask her if she would bring the Mystic Fan to him on the next Monday. She was ready enough to oblige the initiates and earn another ten guineas. The rest of the week passed quietly. On the Saturday evening Tom took her to a film. On returning home he made no attempt to kiss her. She was pleased to observe that he had learned his lesson.

On the Monday afternoon Lord Scredington brought the Mystic Fan to her. She had just made a pile of dripping toast for tea, and since she did not at once return to eat it, but stayed talking to Lord Scredington, her father came into the shop to learn what was detaining her. He wanted his tea.

He said plaintively: "That dripping toast will get cold, Beulah."

"Dripping toast? Did I hear you say dripping toast?" said Lord Scredington, in excited accents. "I've often heard of dripping toast. But I've never tasted it."

"Well, if your Lordship will join us at tea, we shall be very pleased," said Mr. Timmins with polite warmth.

"I should love to," said Lord Scredington with enthusiasm. "I'm convinced that if my doctor were here, dripping toast is the very thing he'd order."

Miss Timmins was rather taken aback. She would never have dreamt of inviting Lord Scredington to tea herself. But since it was done, it was done. The

parlour was shabby enough in all conscience ; but it was not ugly and it was clean.

Lord Scredington displayed an immense appetite for dripping toast. It pleased him to see Miss Timmins kneeling before the fire and toasting more to minister to his appetite. She made a charming picture. At intervals he protested that, his life had been wasted ; that what had been foisted all those years on him as toast was not toast at all. He talked, too, in his liveliest and most cheerful vein and made Mr. Timmins laugh many times, and since Mr. Timmins did not laugh often, he was charmed with his guest. When he went away, Lord Scredington told Miss Timmins that for the future he should make a point of coming to see if she had found any hard stone for him at tea-time. Miss Timmins thought it unlikely that he would do anything of the kind, for that would be a busy hour with him. Nevertheless, she resolved to have a jar of the best dripping always in the larder. It was the only return she could make for his entertaining her.

When the car came for her that night, to her surprise Mr. Gregory stepped out of it.

“How do you do? I have reason to believe that some of my fellow occultists—most unscrupulous persons—are very eager indeed to get hold of the *Mystica Vannus*. Therefore, I thought it advisable to drive down with you myself to make sure that nothing happened to it,” he said, with a resolute air.

Miss Timmins thanked him for his thoughtfulness and stepped lightly into the car, expectant of another pleasant night in the country.

As Mr. Gregory settled down beside her she said :
“ I suppose it's that horrible Mr. Harris ? ”

“ He and his friends. But how did you come to know about Mr. Harris ? ” said Mr. Gregory in some astonishment.

She told him of Mr. Harris's attempt to obtain the fan from her by a mixture of bulldosing and hypnosis.

“ He's a dreadful person,” he said solemnly. “ A reincarnation of Cesare Borgia or his uncle—we are not sure which. He is a man of amazing psychic powers, but he keeps wholly on the black path—a very evil influence indeed—undoubtedly the wickedest man in Europe—probably in the world.”

“ He looks like it,” said Miss Timmins with conviction, though she suspected that wicked men—indeed, films she had seen assured her of it—were to be found in the world, especially in the Western part of the United States.

“ He would stick at nothing—absolutely nothing. That was why I decided to drive down with you and make things perfectly safe,” he said with a terrible air.

Miss Timmins looked sharply at the small and gentle Mr. Gregory and thought of the large and formidable Mr. Harris. She wondered if things *were* perfectly safe.

“ I've brought a life-preserver with me,” said Mr. Gregory proudly, producing it from his overcoat pocket. “ And I've given my chauffeur strict orders that he's to stop for nothing and nobody.”

Miss Timmins felt easier in mind. The life-pre-

and slender; the man on the right was tall and bulky.

The tall and slender man said in civil, cultivated, but compelling accents: "We want the *Mystica Vannus*, please. We don't want to have to take it from you. You might get hurt."

The tall and bulky man said nothing; but he placed the cold tip of the barrel of a large revolver against Mr. Gregory's left ear.

"But this is monstrous! Monstrous!" exclaimed Mr. Gregory in an immense indignation. "I know you, Harris! I know you!"

The tall and bulky man said nothing; the tall and slender man said: "Be quick."

Miss Timmins also said nothing; she did not wish to waste time; she handed the box that held the Mystic Fan to the tall and slender gentleman with the cultivated intonation.

He made sure that the fan was in it, said "Thank you," and dropped a thick envelope on to her lap.

Both men stepped backwards; both doors were snapped to. The two men ran briskly to the cars that blocked the road. The cars went off. The whole business had taken barely thirty seconds, and the *Mystica Vannus* had gone!

Mr. Gregory burst into loud and poignant lamentations; Miss Timmins did not give ear to them. The large thick envelope had excited her girlish curiosity. She found that it was addressed to her. She opened it. It contained five-pound notes. A trifle dazed by the thickness of the packet she counted them. There were twenty.

The Bentley started, ran thirty yards, and stopped.

Miss Timmins looked inside the envelope again. She found a slip of paper. On it was typed :

“ This is for your trouble in bringing the *Mystica Vannus* to us.”

Again that reluctance to have money directly connected with the fan.

She put the notes into her hand-bag with rather fumbling fingers—a hundred pounds!

The chauffeur opened the door of the car and said in indignant accents : “ Those perishers have cut the right front tyre into ribbons, sir. It will take me a matter of twenty minutes to put on another one.”

Mr. Gregory got out of the car ; Miss Timmins followed him. He went to the injured tyre ; she strolled to a gate thirty yards down the road and leant on it, enjoying the fragrant air and the singing of a nightingale in the edge of the wood at the end of the meadow. As she enjoyed them, her mind played also with the pleasing thought of two more frocks and two more new hats.

A car was coming fast along the road from London. Their chauffeur stepped to the Bentley's horn and honked away. The car slowed down, then stopped a few yards beyond the gate on which Miss Timmins was leaning. Lord Scredington swung his legs over the steering-wheel, dropped clear of the car, and came to her.

“ Are you all right ? ” he asked anxiously.

“ Quite, thanks.”

“ Did they get the *Mystica Vannus* ? ”

"They got it," said Miss Timmins in tranquil accents.

"I only learnt what that brute Harris was up to less than an hour ago. I bucketted off after you as hard as I could. I hope that they didn't annoy you much."

"Not me. But they annoyed Mr. Gregory dreadfully. I just gave them the box with the *Mystica Vannus* in it without any arguing. There was nothing else to do." She paused and added in pleased and rather awed accents: "They gave me an envelope with twenty five-pound notes in it for bringing it to them."

"Splendid!" said Lord Seredington with genuine enthusiasm.

Miss Timmins hesitated; then she said in rather unhappy accents: "But I do wish that the *Mystica Vannus* hadn't been a fake. I don't like getting a hundred pounds for a fake."

"Heavens! Don't be so morbid!" he cried. "You did get it. It was pushed at you. Besides, you're forgetting the box and the four crystal balls. They got them too. They weren't fakes."

Miss Timmins sighed. She had been looking forward to a night in the country.

CHAPTER XIV

THE EIGHT FROGS

MR. GREGORY joined them, no longer lamenting, but furious. He declared that he was resolved to prosecute Harris with the utmost rigour of the law ; he would drive him out of England to the end of the world. He tried to comfort Miss Timmins for the loss of the Mystic Fan, but he did not try long, for he knew that that loss was irreparable ; he was not deceived by Miss Timmins's brave pretence that she was quite content with the hundred pounds she had gotten for it.

Lord Scredington was soothing with him ; he assured him that he ought to have no difficulty whatever in getting the evidence that Harris had stolen the Mystic Fan ; he suggested that Mr. Gregory should learn from some member of Harris's circle who had it, and should employ half a dozen pugilists to get it back for him, on the principle that violence was the only proper answer to violence. Mr. Gregory was still blinking doubtfully over the suggestion, when Lord Scredington said that it was a shame to leave Miss Timmins standing about in the evening damp,

while the chauffeur was putting a fresh wheel on the Bentley, and fairly whisked her into his own car and was off with her.

He did not take the road to London; he made a circuit of about a hundred miles, driving slowly that she should enjoy the country, and gave her a simple supper—eggs and bacon were the chief dish—at a wayside inn, and brought her home, very full of sleep, at a few minutes past three in the morning. She went to bed, profoundly convinced that the time really to enjoy a country drive in a car was after midnight.

Three days later she went to Farringdon's to examine the lots in his next sale, which were on view the day before it. One of the lots was eight crystal and agate frogs. She had seen it in the catalogue and given no thought to it; but when she saw the frogs, she gave them her most earnest attention, for they were uncommonly attractive. As she studied them one by one, sheer pleasure made her beautiful blue eyes shine brighter and deepened the delicate colour in her cheeks.

It was plain to her trained eye that they were the work of three carvers; the three of crystal were the work of one man, the three of bluish agate of another, the brown agate and the green moss agate frogs of a third. All those three carvers had been artists; they had the right feeling and the technique to express it. But the carver of the brown frog and the green was a genius. She wanted that green frog for herself, and she wanted it badly. It was not as naturalistic as the others; the artist, abstracting,

had given it simpler, more austere lines ; it was the essential frog.

But it was not for her. This was the lot which would bring the collectors of Chinese hard stone in a body to the sale next day ; and their bids would soar to a height which would make it impossible to make a pleasing profit out of it. She thought that she would have to go to eighty pounds for the lot, and that would be to tie up too much capital. She would be a long time selling the other seven frogs at ten guineas apiece, for small pieces, however good, were harder to sell than larger pieces which looked to be more for more money.

With a sigh she turned to the consideration of the other lots, to find that there was one which would suit her very well—three good jade amulets. Those could easily sell for ten guineas apiece to the occult customers introduced to her by the Mystic Fan. That lot she would buy and two others, if they went cheap. She marked her catalogue with the prices to which she would go for them, then returned to the frogs and again studied the green frog at length, with a loving eye. She left it with a sigh.

During the afternoon and evening she kept seeing it with the eyes of her mind. It kept intruding, very pleasantly, into the conversation of Tom Anderson and Mr. Kettleby. She might very well have dreamt of it. She had not wanted a beautiful thing she had seen in a sale-room as badly as she wanted that frog since the day on which she first saw the lapis lazuli cloak-hook.

She came to the sale early ; Farringdon was selling

netsuke. She jotted down the prices of the lots, but she was not interested. She was interested in the behaviour of her eyes; they would keep turning to the door by no volition of hers, and she knew that they were looking for the entry of Lord Scredington, though she would not for a moment admit it to herself. Indeed, the conscious and correct Miss Timmins was annoyed that her eyes should behave like that; but she found herself unable to prevent it; something in her subconsciousness was the cause of it, something in the nature of a Scredington complex.

Lord Scredington did not come through the door; Bouncer Bosanquet did. A paunchy man of forty, with a roving black eye, wavy black hair, and a large black moustache which he was always twirling with an air of irresistibility, he was a bugbear to her. Three years before, when she was sixteen, and beginning to take the active part in her father's business, he had taken her under his wing at the sale-rooms, advising her what to buy and what not to buy. At first friendly, he had presently become gallant. An astonishingly accomplished teller of the tale, he had filled her girlish mind to the brim with stories about his romantic origin and romantic life, and gone a long way towards taking her girlish fancy. Then before, fortunately, things had gone further, he had shamelessly tricked her out of a score of fine Japanese sword-guards she had bought very cheaply, merely because they had appealed to her natural taste and without knowing anything about them, at a suburban sale. On the top of this shock had come the informa-

tion that he was a married man with six children. How she had hated him!

Miss Timmins was grieved to observe that the prices of the netsuke were running high. But it was a comfort that none of the collectors of Chinese hard stone were present, and when the sale of the lots of hard stone began, they still did not come. The three jade amulets were knocked down to her for a sum on which she could make a very pleasing profit indeed, and she was examining them, wondering whether the queer-looking one would not actually bring good luck, when the eight frogs were put up for sale. She watched the bidding without much interest.

Of a sudden she awoke to the fact that even now not a single collector of hard stone was present. She jerked upright on her chair, thrilling with sudden hope. If a dealer bought the lot, she might yet get the green frog. Few dealers would recognise how much finer it was than the more realistic ones.

The bids ran slowly up to £30. Then only Bouncer Bosanquet and Huggins, Red Huggins, went on bidding. Miss Timmins thought that Huggins was not really keen on the frogs, but only bidding Bouncer up. He disliked Bouncer, who had tricked him out of a fine collection of amber, heartily; indeed, it was he who had, in his bitterness, conferred the title of "Bouncer" on him.

At Bouncer's bid of £34 Huggins shrugged his shoulders and turned away; Bouncer twirled his moustache with a triumphant air and waited for the sound of the hammer.

Miss Timmins had not meant to spend forty pounds

at this sale ; she had about as much hard stone as she wanted. But thirty-four pounds for those frogs ? No!

She bid thirty-five.

Bouncer came down from his height of satisfaction with a jolt. He scowled at her and bid thirty-six. Miss Timmins nodded. Farrington said : "Thirty-seven." Bouncer drew himself up with an air and in commanding accents bid thirty-eight. Miss Timmins nodded. "Thirty-nine," said Farrington.

"Forty !" said Bouncer quickly.

Miss Timmins's heart leapt in her bosom ; from his tone and from his quickness she guessed that that was his limit ; indeed, she was sure of it. Farrington would not give him credit to the amount of sixpence ; he had come to the sale with only forty pounds in cash in his pocket. Confidently she said "Forty-one." Farrington knocked the lot down to her.

She said that she would take the frogs at once, and in her delight at getting them, her fingers trembled a little as she took them from the tray the commissionaire set before her. She put them into her hand-bag. Tingling with a pleasing sensation of victory, she left the sale-room. When she reached home she had to wash and polish the green frog before she took her hat off. She found that the fact that it was now her own had destroyed none of its charm for her.

She washed and polished the other frogs, but did not set them in the window. She put them away in a cabinet against the next visit of Lord Scredington, not only because he would give her a better price for them than any other of her customers, but because

they would please him very much indeed—always supposing he gave her none of his cheek. If he did, she would tell him at length how beautiful they were and how he would love to have them, and then sell them to someone else. It would be only right. Perhaps even it might teach him—not that she really believed he could be taught.

The green frog she put into the drawer under the counter so that, when the fancy took her, she could take it out and admire and fondle it.

Late in the afternoon there came into the shop a slim, frail-looking woman of thirty-five, of a pale complexion, with a thin, sharpish nose, a rather prim mouth, but very pleasant blue eyes. From her clothes Miss Timmins perceived that she was an American on her travels, from her accent that she came from a Southern State.

She moved quietly about the shop, examining the objects of art and asking questions about them. She had a precise manner of speech and an uncommonly clear enunciation. Miss Timmins did not think she would buy anything; she took it that she was picking her brains with a view to improving her own mind. As a rule she was brusque with such customers. But no one with that beautiful green frog under her hand could be brusque with anyone; she was cool, but courteous.

The lady took to her. Indeed, it looked as if she had not found other dealers so civil and was grateful. Presently, apropos of a Ming bronze, she told Miss Timmins the history of her life. Her name was Calhoun, Anne Calhoun. She had been a school-

teacher and had expected to remain a school-teacher till she could work no more ; but in the previous year her brother John, who had gone north in 1899, had died and left her fifty thousand dollars. Some of her dearest dreams were coming true.

Anne Calhoun went on to tell her that she had a great ambition. She was resolved to take home with her a really great work of art, to be, apparently, a nucleus of culture in her home town, and on it she proposed to spend five thousand dollars. On the voyage over she had learnt from a fellow passenger, by whose cultured outlook she had been vastly impressed, that, if she desired to buy a really great work of art, it would have to be Eastern and old ; that modern artists, whether of the East or of the West, had lost the secret of beauty ; that five thousand dollars would go very little way towards buying the beautiful things made in Europe before that secret was lost—about the end of the fifteenth century ; but that great masterpieces of the East were still to be found and bought by those who searched for them. Evidently, her informant had been a purist and a modern of moderns—a most unfortunate adviser for the poor lady to have chanced on.

But Miss Timmins was wholly of his way of thinking. She said firmly : “ He was quite right.”

“ I’m so glad you think so,” said Anne Calhoun thankfully.

“ But such a piece as you want, a really fine big piece, will take a lot of finding,” said Miss Timmins.

“ They don’t come by every steamer.”

“ I believe I’m on the track of it,” said Anne

Calhoun with a note of triumph in her voice. "Yesterday, I was at a sale at Christie's and I happened to be sitting next to a gentleman who was very kind about telling me about the things that were being sold. And after the sale I told him what I have told you; and he told me that he believed he knew of the very thing I wanted."

"He would," said Miss Timmins with conviction.

"Yes. But it isn't one thing; it's eight things—a collection," said Anne Calhoun quickly, and her gentle eyes sparkled. "And they're not in England; they're in Italy—eight frogs carved in agate and crystal and collected by Prince Sarrazin of Siena. Each frog is the absolute masterpiece of a different artist. The Prince hunted China from end to end for them. Out of the hundreds of frogs of jade and chalcedony and agate and crystal offered to him, he brought back just these eight wonderful masterpieces. It isn't only the frogs themselves, it's the romance of it—the wonderful romance!" She clasped her hands with an air of gentle enthusiasm. "And my friend—I think I may call him my friend—thinks that he could get them for me for five thousand dollars."

"Just five thousand dollars?" said Miss Timmins in a tone that rather lacked warmth and certainly enthusiasm.

"Yes. And he's actually trying to get them—he cabled to the Prince last night about them. I had a letter from him this morning saying that he'd done so," said Anne Calhoun in accents that showed how deeply grateful she was to this benefactor.

"M'm, what's his name?" said Miss Timmins, who was thinking and thinking hard.

"I mustn't tell you that," said Anne Calhoun. "The whole matter has to be kept a profound secret."

"It would have to be," said Miss Timmins with rather weary conviction.

"I oughtn't really to have told you anything about it. But you were so nice to me, telling me things, and I'm sure the secret is safe with you. The Italian Government won't allow works of art to leave the country, you know," Anne Calhoun added gravely.

"His initials aren't A. B. by any chance?" said Miss Timmins.

Anne Calhoun's eyes opened wide, and in a hushed voice of immense astonishment, she said: "Why, you extraordinary girl! However did you guess?"

"I know his style," said Miss Timmins.

An expression of uneasy dismay slowly spread over Anne Calhoun's face; she began: "Why, you don't mean——"

But Miss Timmins had finished her thinking. There would be developments; Albert Bosanquet was not going to lose five thousand dollars without a splendid effort, and she was certainly not going to nip that effort in the bud by saying too much. She broke in:

"I don't mean anything at all. But I tell you what: I'll show you some crystal and agate frogs—quite good ones. You ought to know something about what you're going to buy."

So saying, she went to the cabinet, took out the seven frogs and set them on the counter. Anne

Calhoun, relieved, came to it eagerly, and they went over them one by one, at length: Miss Timmins explaining the quality of each and doing her best to make clear the difference in the style of the three artists.

Then she said carelessly: "Do you think you'd know these seven frogs again if you saw them?"

"I'm certain. I should know every one of them," said Anne Calhoun with immense decision. "They're the sweetest and cutest things I ever saw—and now that you've told me about them so kindly and patiently, I see how beautiful they are. It's hard to believe that Prince Sarrazin's can be finer than these."

"They certainly won't be much finer," said Miss Timmins with dry certainty.

Then she took the green frog from her pocket and set it beside the brown one and added: "These two are the real masterpieces and by the same man. You can hunt through China from end to end, like Prince Sarrazin did, without finding anything better. And I bought these eight frogs at Farrington's sale-room this morning for forty-one pounds—a little less than two hundred dollars. So you know where you are."

"Only two hundred dollars!" cried Anne Calhoun. "Why—why—I'll buy them from you—just for myself."

Miss Timmins shook her head: "No; I have a customer for them. And I don't think, if I were you, I should say anything to Mr. Bosanquet about having seen them. It would look a little distrustful, you know."

"I certainly shan't," said Anne Calhoun quickly. "And I'm so glad you didn't mean anything when you said you knew his style." She paused, then added slowly: "I think he has quite a romantic air. And his eyes and that curving moustache and his beautiful manners remind me of the gentleman I used to know when I was a little girl."

"M'm—did you notice his hands?" said Miss Timmins, and she made a face at the thought of those pudgy paws and dirty nails.

"Yes; I noticed that they weren't very well kept," said Anne Calhoun a little unhappily. "But then English gentlemen are not so careful about having their hands manicured as American gentlemen." She looked again at the frogs, then added wistfully: "Perhaps that customer won't buy these frogs after all, and you'll be able to sell them to me."

"I think he will," said Miss Timmins.

CHAPTER XV

MISS TIMMINS SELLS THE FROGS

ANNE CALHOUN made as if to depart : but Miss Timmins insisted that she should have some tea, and very much Anne enjoyed it, for in Mr. Timmins she found a congenial soul. She listened to his exposition of the time-old adventures of the Brits with absorbed interest and assured him that she would buy some of the literature of the subject before she left England and study it on the voyage home. Then, after thanking Miss Timmins for her kindness, and saying that she would come and see her again, she did go.

At the shop door Miss Timmins said casually : "I should like to know how you get on about those frogs of Prince Sarrazin."

"You shall," said Anne Calhoun gratefully. "I'll come round and tell you about them."

"And if you should ever see those frogs of mine again, don't say you saw them here. Just say they were at Farrington's sale this morning, Wednesday the twenty-second, and fetched forty-one pounds," said Miss Timmins in careless accents.

"I will—I will. Good-bye," said Anne Calhoun, and walked down the street.

Miss Timmins looked after her and liked her. Anne was a gentle, simple creature, and under Miss Timmins's sophistication her heart was simple as well as of gold. She was pleased to be helping her.

She was also going to enjoy the procedure of Mr. Bosanquet. Anne Calhoun was going to be the subject of an intensive campaign. The business of bringing those frogs from Italy and their romantic owner would be worked up till he had made her half crazy to get them. But for the luck of her chancing on Miss Timmins in an amiable mood he would have swindled her with ease.

But what a fool the man was! The frogs he had seen on view at Farringdon's the morning before had suggested this ingenious swindle; he must have them; yet he had gone to the sale with only forty pounds in his pocket, when it had been at least twenty to one against his getting them for that sum. He had not got them; he had yet to get them.

Sure enough, as Miss Timmins had expected, at ten o'clock next morning he came into the shop with a lordly air and, though unshaven, diffused about it an agreeable odour of beer. He entered twirling his moustache with the irresistible air.

He said in a lordly voice: "Ah, Miss Timmins. Good morning. I've come on a little matter of business—those, ah—frogs you bought at Farringdon's. Do you care to part with them—at a reasonable profit?"

"Not particularly," said Miss Timmins in about

the least enthusiastic voice that ever issued from human lips, and she took the green frog from the drawer and gazed fondly at it.

Mr. Albert Bosanquet gave his moustache another twirl and in an even more lordly voice said: "Ah—I'll give you five pounds for your bargain."

"You won't," said Miss Timmins with gentle decision, and she began to polish the green frog with a piece of silk.

A slight, rather surprised frown furrowed Mr. Bosanquet's narrow brow; and he said in the same lordly accents: "Ah, well, seven pounds ten, then."

"Nor seven pounds ten," said Miss Timmins in the same gentle voice.

The frown furrowed Mr. Bosanquet's brow more deeply. He raised his offer only to have it refused. He raised it again and yet again, with the same result. Then, with a rather excessive bitterness, he asked Miss Timmins what she *did* want for the frogs.

In accents both dulcet and honied, Miss Timmins said: "Well, you ought to have seen quite plainly, Mr. Bosanquet, that that was the finest lot of hard stone frogs that ever came into an English sale-room. I should think that it took the man who collected them ten years, or so, to get them; and they're not to be got again in another twenty. So I shouldn't think of taking less than two hundred pounds for them."

Mr. Bosanquet gasped; his fine black eyes assumed a sudden resemblance to the portholes of a small ship; he murmured thickly and in the accents of one who cannot believe his ears: "The girl's mad!

Two hundred pounds! Nonsense! Such a price was never heard of!"

"You've just heard it," Miss Timmins reminded him sweetly, and she added: "And it's the only price you will hear."

It was the only price he did hear. But it was a long while before he could bring himself to believe that it was the only price he was going to hear. Then he went raging away.

Miss Timmins was sure that he had gone to turn London upside down till he found two hundred pounds.

But she had to have eight frogs. She was not going to sell the green frog to Mr. Bosanquet. She drew her father from the parlour, in which he was studying the latest number of the *Anglo-Israelite*, and left him in charge of the shop. She went round to a friendly dealer, who had bought an agate frog at Christie's a few weeks before; he might still have it. He had; he let her have it for six pounds. It was not to be compared with any of the eight frogs she had; but it would serve her purpose.

She was sure that Mr. Bosanquet, with such a profit in sight, would work with furious energy, leaving no stone unturned, to dig up the two hundred pounds, and she wished Lord Scredington to see the frogs, for they would delight him. She rang him up and invited him to come to see them.

He said: "Darling, I will fly to you at once on the wings of love!"

She slapped the receiver back, scowling. Why should he nearly always be guilty of colossal cheek?

Then she smiled an unkind smile: after all, he was not going to get the frogs; and, always, she had the green one. But somehow or other when, so fresh and debonair, he came smiling into the shop, she did not find herself disliking him nearly as much as she ought. She showed him the frogs and they did delight him. He said that he must have them, if she took, as she would if she could, the last penny he had in the world for them.

"No; I can't let you have them," she said. "I've promised them to someone else, if he can find the money."

He banged both fists down on the counter hard, and cried loudly: "I knew it! I knew it! I knew, though I spoke to you so sweetly when you rang me up, that you'd thought out some ingenious way of lacerating my feelings. You knew quite well that if I didn't have that brown frog, life would never be the same again!"

"Yes; I knew you'd want that brown frog," she said in callous accents. "But Bouncer Bosanquet has gone to dig up two hundred pounds to buy the eight."

He cried out at the idea of the frogs going to that ruffian. But when she told him of the swindle afoot, he agreed, sadly, that he must step aside and let the Bouncer get the lesson he had asked for so resolutely.

Then he laughed and added: "But two hundred! It's quite clear that your father is perfectly right and you *are* one of the lost tribes of Israel—by far the most dangerous of them, too."

Then he grew anxious and said that when Bouncer Bosanquet's bubble burst, he might cut up uncommonly rough. Miss Timmins said that she did not care how rough he cut up.

"Of course, you don't," said Lord Scredington in ready agreement. "But all the same, I'd better be about when it does burst, to take him on for you, and anyhow you'd love to have me about the shop for two or three days."

"I should *not*," said Miss Timmins, with immense decision.

"If you were not so beautiful and so sweet, I should tell you that you were a little beast," said Lord Scredington coldly.

He did not leave her for some time and contrived to say many charming things to her without ruffling her sensibilities, and before he went he induced her to promise to let him know when Bouncer Bosanquet's bubble was due to burst.

The next morning Mr. Albert Bosanquet entered the shop with a companion, rather paunchier, who diffused the impression that he was lurking with a disquieting stealthiness behind the massive gold chain which lay across his lower bosom.

"Ah, good morning, Miss Timmins," he said, almost in the rich voice of a Satrap. "My brother—this is Miss Timmins, Hector—my brother and I have decided to buy those—ah—frogs—if you care to take a hundred and fifty pounds for them."

"I don't," said Miss Timmins, surveying him and his brother with impartial, cold disfavour.

Mr. Bosanquet scowled darkly and muttered some-

thing about grasping dispositions; then he said: "Let's have a look at them."

"Why shouldn't we have a look at the money first?" said Miss Timmins, with cold sweetness. "This is a cash transaction."

The brothers hesitated—Albert furious, Hector startled; but evidently not surprised that a suggestion of his brother should be received with caution.

Then Albert said with splendid haughtiness and a magnificent twirl of his moustache: "My—ah—brother is not used to having his financial stability doubted."

"He will be, if he goes into many deals with you," said Miss Timmins, in a pleasant, conversational tone.

Albert ground his teeth and glared; then he recovered himself and displayed, with a lordly flourish, seven ten-pound notes. Hector hesitated; then he displayed thirteen ten-pound notes.

Miss Timmins opened the cabinet and set out the frogs.

Albert scanned them with an aloof and lofty air; then he started and said sharply: "But there was a green one among them! I saw you polishing it!"

"Yes; but it hadn't enough work in it for a real collector. This one makes up the set better," said Miss Timmins calmly, patting the eighth frog.

Satisfied, Albert accepted the explanation with a grunt.

But Hector exclaimed, in a tone of affright: "'Ere—I say, Bertie—they're very small. Is this all we git for two 'undred pound?"

Neither his accent nor his aitches matched his heroic name.

"Why? They're life-size," said Albert, looking at him with a somewhat surprised air.

"I thought they'd be bigger nor that," said Hector disconsolately.

"You don't understand these things," snapped his brother; then he said to Miss Timmins in lordly accents: "We'll take them."

With a finely prodigal air he pushed his seven notes across the counter. After a little hesitation, Hector pushed his thirteen across with the air of one pushing his life-blood. Miss Timmins wrote the receipt and handed it to Hector. Albert drew the frogs towards him.

"Stop!" said Miss Timmins imperiously. "You're not going to put beautiful things like that into your dirty pocket!"

Albert stopped, glaring. He drew out a handkerchief, about a fortnight old, and wiped his brow. With a leisurely carefulness, Miss Timmins wrapped each frog in tissue paper and put them into a cardboard box and filled it with more paper.

Then she handed them to Hector and said: "There you are."

"Yes we *are*," said Albert in a tone of deep meaning as he drew himself up to his full height and fiercely twirled his moustache. "And now I'm going to tell you that the price you made me pay for those frogs is an imposition—a gross imposition—and to a fellow-dealer too!"

"You wouldn't pay me two hundred for those

frogs unless you were going to make a jolly good profit on it," said Miss Timmins, quite unruffled. "And you may be a dealer, but you're not a fellow-dealer. I'm square, and you're a stupid crook, you know."

Mr. Bosanquet gasped and blinked painfully. Then he snorted and said in a terrible voice: "You seem to think, my girl, that because you're a young woman you can make libellous statements about me with impunity. You never made a greater mistake in your life. You'll hear from my solicitor about this."

"Shall I?" said Miss Timmins sweetly. "When?"

"By the first post to-morrow morning," said Mr. Bosanquet, still terribly.

"Right," said Miss Timmins cheerfully. "Tell him not to miss the last post to-night."

Mr. Bosanquet did not say that he would tell him, he did not say that he would not; he left loftily. Hector shambled out after him, hugging the box of frogs with a pained air. Their size still troubled him; he felt that, at the price, they should at least be as large as guinea-pigs. Miss Timmins gazed upon the departing brothers with the quiet, filling satisfaction of one who is not only about to get a good deal of her own back, but is also already on velvet to the tune of a hundred and fifty-three pounds.

She did not see that she could do more than she was doing for Anne Calhoun; she felt that for her to confront Mr. Bosanquet, outraged in his deepest instincts by being found out, would go a long way to prevent her from being finally swindled over some

other five-thousand-dollar masterpiece. She awaited the opening of the Bosanquet campaign in a pleased expectancy.

She had not long to wait. At 4.30, as she had promised, Anne Calhoun came rather jubilant with a telegram she had just received. It ran :

Agent cables Prince Sarrazin consents to consider your offer Bosanquet.

After reading it with a queer smile, Miss Timmins again awoke doubt in her mind by telling her to take care of it, and not on any account lose it.

The first post next morning did not bring Miss Timmins a letter from Mr. Bosanquet's solicitor, but it brought Anne Calhoun a letter from Mr. Bosanquet himself. He began it with his usual courtliness, "Dear Lady," and wrote that he considered the mere fact that Prince Sarrazin had consented to consider her offer very promising indeed; that it was very fortunate that he happened to be a personal friend of the Prince, for he was convinced that had his agent in Siena brought that offer from anyone not vouched for by him, that "proud and haughty Royalty" would have rejected it "with the cold scorn of the Italian aristocrat."

Miss Timmins again knew the style; but she did not say so.

"But you haven't made an offer. He's getting these frogs on approval, isn't he?" she said quickly.

Anne said that she had certainly not made any offer, but merely accepted Mr. Bosanquet's suggestion

that he should get the frogs for her to see. Miss Timmins made her write to him then and there that she had made no offer, that the frogs were coming on approval, and that she would not buy them unless she liked them. She made her make a copy of this letter and initialled it. Then she warned her earnestly against entertaining high expectations of the frogs, because she was nearly sure that, when she saw them, she would not pay five thousand dollars for them.

That afternoon Anne Calhoun brought another telegram. The campaign was well under way. It ran :

*Prince Sarrazin still considering your offer agent
very hopeful Bosanquet.*

The enthusiastic fellow must that morning have received Anne Calhoun's letter putting on record the fact that she had made no offer, but evidently he considered it unimportant.

Next morning came a great advance, a telegram which ran :

Prince Sarrazin accepts your offer Bosanquet.

Miss Timmins had expected him to call, thrilling with enthusiasm, on Anne Calhoun. But he did not. She took it that he kept away from her because he did not wish to go into the matter of whether she had definitely offered five thousand dollars for the frogs; that he was trusting to her excited desire for them and his own eloquence to get the money. Next

morning there was a slight withdrawal—a letter in which he said that things had so far gone very well—marvellously—but Anne was not to feel sure even now of getting the frogs; for, though he had made such arrangements as had made failure practically impossible, they might fail to get past the Italian Custom House. It increased Anne's excitement.

The next morning there was another advance, a telegram:

*Objects safely out of Italy most gratifying
Bosanquet.*

Anne was immensely excited.

Next morning came a letter of unrestrained jubilation. He congratulated her on the splendid luck she was having, and declared that it had been ordained from the beginning of time that those unsurpassable masterpieces should be hers.

In the afternoon came a telegram:

Frogs arrived Paris Bosanquet.

That evening came another:

*Agent crossing to-night frogs will be yours at
11 a.m. to-morrow Bosanquet.*

Anne was thrilled; in her excitement she did not fall asleep till three in the morning.

The next morning came a letter in which he congratulated her on her successful termination of an

affair of the first importance, and her extraordinary luck in chancing upon the one man in England who could carry it through in record time. In a postscript he added that, owing doubtless to the fact that the Italian nobility had so often been tricked by swindlers, the Prince had made the stipulation that he was only to deliver the frogs for cash down, and it would facilitate matters if she had the five thousand dollars ready at her hotel when he brought them to her.

Anne Calhoun came with this letter to Miss Timmins at the very height of excitement. The cumulative effect of the telegrams and letters was that she had formed the impression that Europe had been standing still to watch the passage of these unsurpassable masterpieces from Prince Sarrazin to herself. They had come to seem to her cheap at five thousand dollars; she was sure that she was getting the bargain of the century, that she would be the greatest artistic benefactor the Southern States had ever known. She called on her way to her bank to get the money.

As she looked at her excited face and listened to her jubilant and enthusiastic words, Miss Timmins's mind misgave her; Anne seemed fairly hypnotised, and Bosanquet might yet bluff or bully the five thousand dollars out of her, in spite of the coming revelation about the frogs. She must be more open with her.

"Look here; you mustn't have that five thousand dollars at the hotel," she said firmly. "It won't be safe. I'm certain that this business is a swindle—that if there is any Prince Sarrazin, these won't be his frogs."

Anne Calhoun, startled and astounded, stared at her with her mouth open.

"I wish I could be somewhere handy when that beast brings them," added Miss Timmins, frowning, as she cudgelled her brains for a way of being at hand, but unseen. "But if he sees me, it will spoil everything. It'll soften the jolt, I mean."

Anne protested that Mr. Bosanquet could not be trying to swindle her; that in view of his telegrams and letters, it was impossible. Miss Timmins shrugged her shoulders and said no more. Then, weakening, Anne said that she had taken the sitting-room, into which her bedroom opened, and Miss Timmins could overhear the whole interview from that bedroom.

"I will," said Miss Timmins. "What's the number of the sitting-room?"

Anne told her. At once she rang up Lord Scredington, found that he was out, and left a message that the frogs would be delivered at 11 o'clock that morning at room 127, the Bastable Hotel, Bedford Square. Then she made the excited Anne walk all the way back to the hotel, by way of calming her nerves. She would not allow her to draw the five thousand dollars from the bank; she said that, if the frogs proved to be all right, Albert Bosanquet could wait a quarter of an hour for the money.

At 10.55 Miss Timmins went into the bedroom.

At 10.56 the brothers Bosanquet, clad in their best and wearing also the pleased and excited air of men engaged in an important and profitable undertaking, began to mount the stairs to room 127. Hector still carried the frogs.

Half-way up the stairs the brothers paused to take breath, and Albert said bitterly: "Look here, Ned: you're here by no wish of mine. I've told you twenty times I can do the job much better without you——"

"And I've told you, Bertie, oftener nor that, that I'm not goin' to lose sight of you till I've got my share of the thousand quid. You've let me down too hoften for me to take any chances," said Hector, coldly stubborn.

"Well, all I say is, don't you go and spoil everything by opening your mouth. You can't bear in mind for two seconds after you've opened it that you're Hector Bosanquet and not any longer Edward Binns—so keep it shut, and don't give the whole show away," said Albert fiercely, and he resumed the ascent.

At 10.59 Lord Seredington entered the lobby of the hotel, asked for Miss Calhoun, room 127, and began to mount the stairs leisurely. He could not, he thought, be needed for at least five minutes.

Albert Bosanquet knocked firmly on the door of room 127 and, smiling triumphantly, entered with his most imposing air. Anne Calhoun rose; he strode to her majestically, took her hand, squeezed it, smiling upon her with loyal affection, and said in a hushed, impressive voice:

"The luckiest woman in England! How are you?"

He loosed her hand, waved his towards Hector, and said splendidly: "My brother Hector—the bearer of the masterpieces!"

Hector presented a flabby, clammy hand; Anne shook it and said that she was pleased to meet him. Albert took the box from his reluctant hands, set it on

the table, rapped it with his knuckles, and said impressively :

“ A king’s ransom.” He beamed gallantly on Anne Calhoun and added : “ You lucky woman—as fortunate as you must be attractive to those who really know you.”

His manner, his air, his loyal eyes, his rich jubilant voice, all combined to sweep from Anne Calhoun’s mind the base suspicions with which Miss Timmins had filled it.

And the box : the brown paper in which it was wrapped was stamped in half-a-dozen places with blue, red, and black stamps—evidently the stamps of the Customs Houses it had passed through. They settled the matter.

Talking quickly and enthusiastically about her astonishing luck, Mr. Bosanquet cut the string, pulled off the paper, and opened the box. He took out a frog wrapped in tissue paper, unwrapped it, and handed it to her.

“ Yours at last ! ” he said, with a magnificent sigh of relief and satisfaction.

Anne Calhoun, awed by the greatness of the event, took the frog with trembling fingers—the treasure of a Prince ! She looked at it with eyes that for some seconds could not see it. Then they cleared and saw it with a growing distinctness. They opened wider and wider ; she gasped faintly and nearly dropped the masterpiece ; then her parted lips closed and slowly set in a thin, straight line.

In two seconds Mr. Bosanquet was all over the frog, explaining its quality and its beauty, eloquently, with

passion, dithyrambic ; but he did not bring home its beauty to Anne Calhoun with nearly the force that the quieter Miss Timmins had done the first time she saw it ; his panegyric was not born of the same sincere delight in it. Besides, other feelings, not excited by the frog, entered Anne Calhoun's second study of it.

The second frog he handed to her removed any faint hope she might have had that the first frog of Prince Sarrazin was a replica of the frog of Miss Timmins. The second was the brown frog on which Miss Timmins had dwelt longest. Anne's eyes began to shine with a queer light. It was not the light of pleasure.

As Albert Bosanquet took each frog from the box, he said, with rich reverence : "Another unsurpassed masterpiece of another unsurpassed master," and again spread himself. He spread himself over those frogs as he had never spread himself over a work of art before ; there had never been so much to gain by it ; never had his fancy been more fertile, his invention richer. He saw that he had Anne Calhoun dazed, spellbound, hypnotised. She was swallowing everything he told her. What a man he was ! And how he despised her ! The ideal mug !

She said not a word till she set down the eighth frog on the table ; indeed, she could hardly have done so, since Albert Bosanquet was saying everything.

Then, with a curious distinctness, she said : "But I've seen these frogs before. They were sold at Farrington's sale-room on Wednesday, the twenty-second—for two hundred dollars."

At the sound of her voice, Miss Timmins knew that she had been wrong in supposing that she could ever be bluffed out of five thousand, or even fifteen, dollars by Bouncer Bosanquet.

Slowly, his flabbergasted brain grasped Anne Calhoun's meaning. For twenty seconds or longer he sat paralysed.

In his immense emotion, Hector, crouching forward in his chair, with his eyes starting from his head, assumed the very appearance of a frog himself; and a thin whine issued from his twitching lips: "'E's 'ad me agyne!"

Albert recovered; he rose to his feet with a reassuring smile, his honest eyes limpid with a noble candour, and said in accents ringing with veracity: "You are making a mistake, dear lady, a quite natural mistake. You do not understand the great Chinese tradition. For thousands of years they have been carving frogs, father and son and grandson, generation after generation, without departing a millimetre from the tradition. The greatest artist sticks to it; only experts like Prince Sarrazin and myself recognise his greatness. The frogs you saw at Farringdon's may have been like these, very like them, perhaps—I did not see them myself—but I am certain—I would stake my reputation as a connoisseur on it, they were very inferior."

He beamed upon her, frankly setting her right, reassuring.

"They are the same frogs; you can take them away," said Anne Calhoun.

Mr. Bosanquet evidently could not believe his

ears; he looked hurt and amazed; then his face slowly darkened and grew terrible; he appeared to swell; he said in a cold, stern, scornful voice: "I see your game, my good woman. I might have known that these magnificent masterpieces would not appeal to the crude taste of a benighted American female. But it is no use your trying to get out of your bargain. I might allow you to trick me; but I will never allow you to trick my friend, Prince Sarrazin! The five thousand dollars, woman! The five thousand dollars, at once!"

He looked magnificent; he felt magnificent—righteously menacing—compelling—irresistible; he rapped the table in a very threatening manner. Then the bedroom door opened and out came Miss Timmins, smiling unpleasantly.

She said: "That will be about enough from you, Bosanquet. Clear out."

His almost majestic wrath fell from his face like a mask; he dithered as he grasped the fact that there was no five thousand dollars coming to him. Then, slowly, real fury took possession of him and convulsed his features.

He shouted: "Now I know where I am! A conspiracy! You two women have conspired together to get two hundred pounds from me by a trick! I'm going straight to Scotland Yard! I'll jail the pair of you!"

Miss Timmins laughed. There was a knock at the door and Lord Scredington stood on the threshold. He had been leaning patiently against the door-post till he heard the voice of Miss Timmins. The

Bouncer's shout informed him that the time for intervention had come.

He bowed to Miss Calhoun and said: "Please forgive my intrusion. But I was told that there was a small sale of gold bricks going on here, and I thought that there might be one for me."

Albert Bosanquet dropped back on to a chair with one grunt of despair and plunged into speechless gloom.

Hector interposed feverishly; in carneying accents he said: "'Ere, 'ere—why all this ill-feeling about a trifle like this? It's only business. Suppose we drop all this talk about five thousand dollars an' come to brass tacks. What about two 'undred and fifty pound for the eight frogs? What if they ain't Prince Sarrazin's, they're first-class frogs; the best as ever came over. What about two 'undred an' fifty pound?"

"What about fifty, without the two hundred?" said Miss Timmins heartlessly.

"I wouldn't give you a nickel for the eight!" said Anne Calhoun fiercely. "I wouldn't have anything to do with you! You're just two loathsome crooks!"

"Hadn't you two fellows better get out before you're helped?" said Lord Scredington in a tone of kind inquiry, with a kind of bite to it.

They seemed to have heard a tone like that before. Hector hastily scooped the frogs into the box; Albert rose feebly, made a feeble effort to stalk loftily to the door, feebly twirling his moustache, but only succeeded in shambling out.

As he followed him, Hector gazed round on those

hard and unsympathetic faces and whined tearfully :
“ 'E's 'ad me agyne. 'E always 'as me.”

Lord Scredington rather cut short Anne Calhoun's thanks for his intervention at that awkward moment and hurried away. He caught up the brothers Bosanquet. Anne began to thank Miss Timmins. Miss Timmins would not hear of being thanked. She said that she had long wanted to score off that rogue, Albert Bosanquet, and she had done it. But Anne insisted on thanking her at length and insisted that she must help her, at a pleasing fee, to find the genuine masterpiece. They went straight out to look for it. Later they lunched at the Savoy.

Miss Timmins returned to the shop in a pleasant temper. She had not been back long when in came Lord Scredington.

With an air of immense triumph, and holding it out for her to see, he said : “ I've got the brown frog—the finest frog that ever came out of China, Beulah, darling! ”

That tore it.

Miss Timmins scowled at him ; she said in icy accents : “ I don't think it's quite the best frog that ever came out of China. I think that my green one is better. And I compared them very carefully before I chose it.”

“ Your green one ? ” he said sharply. “ What green one ? ”

Miss Timmins moved quietly towards the protective counter. Then she drew the green frog from the drawer and handed it to him. He looked at it earnestly, he compared it with his brown frog. Then

he swallowed an ejaculation. Then he set both hands on the counter and leaning over it, said in a terrible voice :

“ One of these days I shall come round with a special licence and drag you round to the nearest registrar’s and marry you—not because I adore you so passionately, but I know it’s the only way of getting that green frog.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREATEST LOVE CHARM IN THE WORLD

LORD SCREDINGTON went away with a less triumphant air than that with which he had come; but Miss Timmins could not find it in her heart to be sorry for him. After all, he had a very beautiful frog; why could he not be content with it? Why must he always have the best of everything? Besides, why had he called her "Beulah, darling"? It served him right, and her pleasure in the green frog was in no way lessened.

The next morning there came a letter from her father's sister, Martha, who had married a farmer in Devonshire. It was thanks to her having invested her patrimony of five hundred pounds in a mortgage on Mr. Timmins's shop and house, that he had a shop and house at all. The five per cent. interest on that mortgage had always been punctually paid, no matter how hard up they had been, and at times they had been very hard up. She wrote now, plainly with very little hope of his being able to do so, to ask her brother if he could by any chance pay off part of the mortgage, since her husband had an opportunity of making a most profitable addition to his farm if he could raise a few hundred pounds.

Thanks to the extraordinary strokes of luck she had enjoyed during the last few weeks, Miss Timmins had not only paid off all her debts and stocked the shop with some really good Oriental lacquer and porcelain—too good almost for the neighbourhood in which it stood—and provided herself with pretty clothes that would last her for at least six months, or, if she were put to it, for a year, but also she had still in the bank a balance of over four hundred pounds. She was fond of her Aunt Martha, with whom she had more than once spent an August, when business was slack and her father could manage the shop. Also it looked as if they might have to wait for a long time before they would be in such a good position to reduce the burden of the mortgage. Therefore, she was in full agreement with her father, who was very eager to let her aunt have three hundred pounds. Accordingly, Mr. Timmins sent his cheque for three hundred pounds, to the immense surprise of his sister, and the mortgage was reduced by that amount.

Lord Scredington did not come to the shop for several days after his purchase of the brown frog, and Miss Timmins spent some time every day helping Anne Calhoun to find the masterpiece to take to her home town. Then one morning there came into the shop a young Italian. He took from his breast pocket the half of a dirty silk pocket handkerchief, unrolled it, and displayed a small jade disk.

Miss Timmins looked at the Italian and looked at the jade disk. She liked the disk, but she did not like the Italian. He was not a nicely rounded and

greasy, smiling Italian, but small and jagged. His nose stuck out, his brows stuck out, his chin, his cheek-bones, and his ears stuck out, all very jaggedly ; and his small, black, shifty eyes were much too close together.

But she did like the disk, and though she had never seen it, or one like it before, she knew it. She had heard of it. It was a faintly sea-green jade, rather more than two inches in diameter, with a movable centre, and it was carved, partly *à jour*, partly in low relief, with the symbols—a powerful love charm ; indeed, properly treated, the greatest love charm in the world.

Miss Timmins wanted it ; she wanted it badly—not that she needed a love charm. Of that any mirror she chanced to look into assured her. But the fact that she did not need a love charm did not prevent her from greedily craving for this one. In matters of prime importance one cannot make too sure. With that disk hanging round her neck—out of sight, of course—she would feel more comfortable. Not that she attached any real importance to love ; she was not so silly ; she was much too busy with the shop and sales and hunting through the junk shops ; much too busy to bother about things of that kind. She told herself this firmly.

But was it safe to buy the disk from such a jagged Italian ? How had he come by it ? He certainly looked as if he were in the habit of acquiring by theft any property he did acquire. But perhaps his looks belied him—he might have a heart of rolled gold. She hesitated. Then she questioned him about

the disk in accents a trifle imperious, proper in one of the Nordic race speaking to one obviously Mediterranean.

In a sharp, harsh voice he mumbled the tale. The disk belonged to his girl, the girl who was betrothed to him. It had been given to her by a friend. Being hard up, she had asked him to sell it for her.

The story was plausible, but it did not impress Miss Timmins. Had it been a matter of an ordinary jade pendant, she would have had nothing to do with it. But a love charm—a love charm was different. It seemed natural that it should come to one not in the ordinary way.

She asked him how much he wanted for it. He shrugged his shoulders; he displayed the palms of his hands; his black eyes shone; he mumbled volubly about the rarity and expensiveness of the piece; he said that he wanted a pound for it. Miss Timmins's suspicions were confirmed; either the Italian or his lady-love had come by the charm informally.

She said in accents of the coldest severity: "I'll give you fifteen shillings."

She felt that there must be no pampering the transgressor.

She expected a protest, a storm of wild and whirling protests, with lashin's of gesture and facial contortion. Nothing of the kind came. The Italian held out a dirty, claw-like hand; a chasm, set with black and pointed rocks, opened wide in the lower part of his face, and there rang out, loud and clear and fearless, the slogan of his kind:

“Giva da mon!”

Regretting that she had not offered him seven-and-sixpence, Miss Timmins gave him the money, and he left the shop with a stealthy swiftness.

The love charm had, to all seeming, been scented carefully with garlic. Miss Timmins washed it till it smelt of garlic no more and began to polish it with a chamois-leather. She had brought it to a superfine lustre and was looking at it lovingly, when Lord Scredington came suddenly through the door of the shop, with the same stealthy swiftness with which the Italian had gone out of it. She saw him; her hand dropped sharply below the level of the counter, but not sharply enough to prevent his keen eyes from grasping the fact that she was hiding something from him—probably an object of art of unusual merit. This had happened before—that green frog, for example. Was it the kind of thing he could allow? Certainly not!

He said: “Good morning, Beulah, darling. What have you got there?”

Cheek was no way to get anything out of her; she refused flatly to show him the disk.

He expostulated and entreated and dwelt at length on the folly of allowing one's temper to interfere with one's business; he warned her that she was not only taking the risk of failing to make an uncommonly advantageous sale, but also of estranging for ever her best customer. She began by being lofty with him—the proper attitude to assume after his cheek. Then, as his persistence became almost badgering, she grew curt, and even harsh. Slowly, he grew gloomier and

gloomier till, as she phrased it to herself, his face was like a funeral. Though she was always doubting his sincerity, once again she could not quite believe that he was shamming, and the faintest frown of distressed doubt furrowed her brow. On the instant he uttered the threat he had found effective before.

He said: "If you don't show me that thing, whatever it is, I shall cry like a child."

It was too much. In a sudden access of exasperation, Miss Timmins said with a harsh callousness: "Cry."

Lord Scredington howled like a dog, and a good loud dog, too.

Miss Timmins gasped. She heard her father spring from his chair in the parlour behind the shop and his spectacles jingle on the floor. That mattered little; but the howl, protracted, was carrying well into the street and down it. What would the neighbours say? Whatever *would* the neighbours say?

"You're the most aggravating——" she was about to say beast, but amended it to "idiot I ever came across!" she snarled, and produced the greatest love charm in the world.

She did not hand it to him, but held it out for him to see, well out of his reach. With his keen-sighted eyes he saw it well enough. He whistled softly, and his eyes grew immensely covetous.

"No wonder you didn't want me to see it," he said softly. "I'll take it."

"You won't!" said Miss Timmins. "I want it myself."

Mr. Timmins appeared at the back door of the

shop and peered at them. He had found his spectacles. When his eyes fell on Lord Scredington, he smiled.

"I thought it was a dog," he said, and went back.

"I'll give you—I'll give you ten times what you gave for it," said Lord Scredington.

"You won't," said Miss Timmins in a tone of finality.

"If you're going to be harsh about it, I shall cry again," he said in a threatening tone.

"You can howl the house down, but you don't get this disk," said Miss Timmins, again in a tone of finality.

Perusing her face, Lord Scredington considered whether he should howl the house down or not. Her face assured him that he would gain nothing by howling the house down.

Changing his tone, he said in imploring accents: "Then give it me, Beulah, darling. You know what a powerful charm it is and how I have adored you for months and months. If you give it me I shall love you for ever and ever. You know I shall."

"I will not," she said.

"But I want it so badly," he pleaded.

"You always want the things I want," she said, with indignant warmth. "Why can't you want the things I don't want? Then you could have them."

"Of course I want the things you want. We have the same exquisite taste and we're immensely sympathetic. That's what makes me adore you so passionately. You know that's what it is. Do give me that charm."

"I won't!" said Miss Timmins violently, after a pause in which she nearly did give it to him.

"Nasty little—angel!" he said bitterly; then he added: "Well, let me look at it. I'll give it back to you."

He examined it carefully with rather hungry eyes; then he said sadly: "Yes; you always want the same things that I want. But you get them. I don't—first, that lapis lazuli cloak-hook, and then the green frog, and now this love charm."

"I like that!" said Miss Timmins with warm indignation. "Why you've got everything! All the money you want—and a title—and—and——"

"Beauty—go on—say it," he suggested.

Miss Timmins did not say it.

There came a pause; then, letting the matter of her selling it to him drop, he began to discuss the beauty and quality of the charm.

Then he said: "Of course, it's quite harmless as it is. But you could make yourself loved to distraction by some unfortunate man, if you knew what to do with it. Fortunately, you don't."

"Oh, don't——" Miss Timmins began, and stopped short.

His eyes opened wide in an astonished stare, and he said: "Whý, you do! Oh, you wicked, wicked girl!"

Miss Timmins blushed, and went on blushing—furious with herself. He laughed and went on laughing: a connection between so delicate and charming a creature as Miss Timmins and sympathetic, but black, magic, seemed to him supremely laughable.

She could have felled him to the earth with a sickening thud.

Of a sudden, he became grave again and said: "Hasn't it occurred to you yet that you could make a great deal of money out of this charm?"

To Miss Timmins he appeared now to be talking, and she asked him how she could make a great deal of money out of it.

At once his expression became mercenary, even greedy, and he said: "How many kisses will you give me to tell you?"

"None!" said Miss Timmins definitely.

"Did I know it? I did," he said bitterly. "Never in all my life have I come across anyone so generous—I don't think. Everything for nothing and a little bit more seems to be your motto, you little horror! But hasn't it occurred to you that you could hire this charm out—for twenty pounds a month or so? I must know at least a dozen bright, blithe, idiot women who would cheerfully pay twenty pounds a month for the use of the greatest love charm in the world."

"But I want it myself," said Miss Timmins.

"Do you want to use it at once?" he said, looking at her curiously.

"No," she said quickly, blushing again.

"Well, why not make some money out of it in the meantime?" he said.

"I don't want it spoilt," she said.

"But it won't be spoilt. None of these women will know how to make it really work, so that there's no fear of it losing any of its virtues," he urged.

"But that wouldn't be fair to them. I should be taking their money for nothing," she protested.

"You wouldn't. The mere possession of a really authentic and powerful love charm like this will give any woman just the extra amount of confidence she needs to get her way with any man," he said confidently.

This was one of those queer and wrong-headed ideas he sometimes had, and she felt bound to protest against it. But he insisted that it was so, that the possession of the disk would fill any woman with an irresistible faith that would remove mountainous obstacles for her. Yet, having done its work, the disk would come back to its owner with its powers intact. In the end she agreed to lend it for twenty pounds a month to any superstitious lady who came to hire it.

"Of course, you'll have to be careful, or they'll steal it from you," he warned her.

"Oh, yes ; I know them," said Miss Timmins.

CHAPTER XVII

LADY KELLINGWORTH HIRES THE CHARM

PRESENTLY he bade her good morning sadly and went away, saying that he was once more going out into the world to act as her press agent. Reluctantly, for she was still annoyed with him for being the cause of the slip which had set her blushing, Miss Timmins admitted to herself that he was really very kind and helpful, in spite of his cheek. Then she breathed the faintest sigh. Then she wrapped the greatest love charm in the world in a small square of orange silk and put it in a little, deeply carved, tortoiseshell incense box, and locked it away in a cabinet.

Lord Scredington indeed went out into the world. During that one afternoon he saw to it that at least forty great ladies of lovable, or, at any rate, loving, age became aware that in the curiosity shop of a man named Timmins in Devonshire Street, Theobald's Road, there was the greatest love charm in the world.

He first informed a party of them of this fact at 4.30 p.m. None of them showed any interest at all in his discovery. But at 4.50 p.m. there came into the shop in Devonshire Street, with a shrinking, even

stealthy air, one of the prettiest ladies Miss Timmins had ever set eyes on. She had a rather long face of warm pallor, really brown hair, the softest brown eyes, and most sensitive lips. She looked shyer than a fawn. Miss Timmins could not remember ever having been in all her life so attracted by anyone at first sight. And the exquisite way she dressed! Everything she wore must have been specially woven and dyed for her, to match the brown of her eyes and hair.

She seemed to find the appearance of Miss Timmins reassuring, for she smiled at her and came straight to the point: "I'm told that you have a jade charm," she said. "I should like to see it."

"I've several jade charms," said Miss Timmins.

"The one I want to see is said to be the greatest love charm in the world," said the lady, twisting her hands with an embarrassed air.

"Oh, you want to see that?" said Miss Timmins, hesitating. "You know that it's not for sale?"

The lady's face fell and she said in a lamentable tone: "No. I didn't."

"But you can hire it," said Miss Timmins. "You can hire it for twenty pounds and keep it for a month, if it doesn't work sooner."

The lady heaved a sigh of relief. Miss Timmins took the little tortoiseshell incense box from the cabinet and handed the disk to her.

"Oh, what a pretty thing!" she cried, feeling it and stroking it with the tips of the slenderest long fingers Miss Timmins had ever seen.

The arrangements for the hiring took no time.

The lady, Lady Kellingworth, agreed to pay twenty pounds for the loan of the charm and return it at the end of the month, or sooner if it had done its work. Then she asked Miss Timmins how it would be best to wear it.

"Out of sight," said Miss Timmins quickly. "And the cord you hang it round your neck with must be silk."

"I will," said Lady Kellingworth; then she hesitated and added: "And you're sure that it really is powerful?"

"Certain," said Miss Timmins with conviction. "It really is the most powerful love charm in the world."

Lady Kellingworth went away smiling, with a faint flush of excitement in her cheeks. Miss Timmins had no scruples about having taken twenty pounds a month from her for the use of the charm, for she could see quite clearly that she would get her money's-worth out of the mere possession of it. Indeed, any woman would. She hoped that Lady Kellingworth would get the man she wanted, though, whoever he might be, he would not be good enough for her.

Five minutes later, another large motor-car stopped in front of the shop and a really resplendent lady, stout, black-eyed and imperious, came with a regal gait into it. She wore the air of one to whom Miss Timmins, the shop, Devonshire Street, and Theobald's Road belonged. Little Miss Timmins found that air displeasing.

The imperious lady looked at Miss Timmins as if she were less than the dust before her chariot wheels,

and said in harsh and haughty accents : " I've come to look at a jade charm you've got."

Miss Timmins said that she had several jade charms, and asked her what kind of charm she was seeking.

The lady hesitated ; then she made up her mind that a common little person like Miss Timmins—she herself had been a nursery governess before she advanced to the peerage via the revue chorus—could not know anything about the greatest love charm in the world.

" I'd better see them," she said in haughty accents.

Miss Timmins produced three milky jade charms : a gourd and vine, which is the emblem of the Buddhist priests, worn to advertise their celibacy ; a tortoise, which is the emblem of solidity and strength ; and the peaches of Seiobo, which help the wearer to live for ever. The haughty lady studied them and appeared puzzled.

She appealed to Miss Timmins ; she said : " Are these silly things what they call love charms ? "

" They might be," said Miss Timmins cautiously, looking at the charms as if she were seeing them for the first time ; then she added cheerfully : " And again they might not."

She would not allow this resplendent lady to pick her brains.

" Are they all the jade charms you've got ? " said the lady.

" All I've got at present," said Miss Timmins.

Thrown upon her own resources, the resplendent lady studied the charms again. It was satisfactory to know that one of them was the greatest love charm

in the world. But which was it? The peaches of Seiobo looked to her most like a love charm. But how could she be sure? It was better—yes: it was certainly better to be on the safe side. She could find out from Lord Scredington later which of the three was the greatest love charm in the world. She bought all three of them for five guineas apiece, and came out of the shop irresistibly equipped to be solid, celibate, and a centenarian.

Before Miss Timmins shut the shop that evening, nine more ladies came in large motor-cars to buy the greatest love charm in the world. She was obliged to start a waiting list and entered their names in order of priority on it. She observed that all of them wore wedding-rings. She quite understood that they were either widows and free, or wives eager to restore the fading affections of their husbands to their original brilliance—at least, she felt bound to believe this. She was able, therefore, to sell to them the small object of art which each bought to win her favour and retain her position on the waiting list, for fifty per cent. more than the usual price, with a wholly clear conscience.

Just as she was shutting up the shop, Lord Scredington arrived to learn whether his spreading the good tidings of the charm had been fruitful. With sparkling eyes, standing incautiously in the middle of the shop without a counter between them, she told him that she had leased the love charm for twenty pounds and sold nearly fifty pounds' worth of objects of art besides. In a natural immense satisfaction at her good fortune, he kissed her quickly three times

before she could tear herself loose. However, taking one thing with another, especially the fact that she had sold nearly fifty pounds' worth of goods, she did not reproach him with an extravagant bitterness. She felt that she was partly to blame for his impudent behaviour for having forgotten to keep the counter between them.

When he heard that Lady Kellingworth had hired the love charm, he appeared uncommonly interested and spoke of the depth of still waters, and the distance fair and softly goes in a day, and the subtilty of widows. Evidently her action had awakened memories of the teaching he had enjoyed at his nurse's knee. He went on to say that he would keep an eye on the young woman and lose no time about it, since it was plain from her haste to secure the charm, that she proposed to get to work at once.

This was the Tuesday evening. On Thursday evening he came to report. He came gleeful.

"It worked," he said in almost triumphant accents. "And I saw it do it. I was at Lady Granton's early and I saw Lady Kellingworth come in. She came in looking rather superb, with a kind of sparkle and brilliance, as if the earth really did belong to her, don't you know? I've never seen her like that before, nor has anyone else—she was always very much on the shy side. It was the love charm that had done it. I hoped that she was wearing it for me; but she wasn't, worse luck! Harmiston was the man, and I never dreamed it—neither did anyone else. He's one of those quiet chaps who never seem to have anything to say for themselves unless you get them alone;

and then they're very good company indeed. He collects Rembrandts—pictures and drawings and etchings."

"Very expensive," said Miss Timmins, impressed.

"He can afford it," said Lord Scredington. "Well, he came in with Lady Brauncewell. She's rather taken charge of Harmiston—a short, dark, bright, noisy woman with a hooked nose and lots of teeth—you know the kind—always being animated."

Miss Timmins had a rough idea of the kind and she nodded.

"Well, she bounced in and Harmiston came a little way behind her—he always seems a little way behind her. I saw them come in and turned my attention to Lady Kellingworth again, and saw that she was looking at Harmiston and blushing a little, and she seemed to shine just a little more. He shook hands with Lady Granton and looked round the room and saw Lady Kellingworth looking at him. And then, suddenly, he looked as if he were looking at something quite new—rather funny—and then he went straight across the room to her as if he were in a bit of a hurry. And as he came she made a little dab at the middle of her chest—where the charm was, of course. And when he shook hands with her, I noticed that they were looking at one another rather queerly; and he said something about her looking like a fairy princess who had just wakened. That was how she struck him, though really, you know, he'd just wakened himself. And I moved on, for I didn't suppose she would want anyone to notice any more. But she was beautifully flushed, and her eyes were shining."

"That was nice of you," said Miss Timmins in rather surprised accents.

"You'd have cleared out yourself—one had to," he said simply.

"And what happened then?" she said rather eagerly.

"I saw them dancing together for about an hour. And later, I heard Lady Brauncewell clamouring for him to take her on to Lady Bettington's. But they had gone and they didn't turn up at Lady Bettington's, neither Lady Kellingworth nor Harmiston. I expect they forgot most things. I expect they motored into the country to see the moon. And, after all, it is very easy to forget a lot of teeth under a hooked nose, you know."

Miss Timmins laughed softly and said: "I'm glad. I thought Lady Kellingworth was very nice." Then she added in impressed accents: "It's wonderful what a charm can do, if you get the real thing."

"I wonder," he said, doubtfully. "I fancy that what the charm really did was to give Lady Kellingworth confidence to get herself across. I tell you what: they ought to ask you to their wedding. You certainly made her auto-suggest herself into looking four times as beautiful as Harmiston or I had ever seen her."

"It's all very well, that auto-suggestion; but it might just be that the charm worked," protested Miss Timmins, thoughtfully.

They discussed these mysteries for a while; then he went. Always Miss Timmins saw him go with the

odd feeling that he went right out of her world and might never come back.

But he came again two mornings later and greeted her in a wholly decorous fashion, or, as she would have phrased it, without giving her any of his cheek, and made a request.

"Look here," he said. "I want you to let me have that jade disk for a few days, when Lady Kellingworth brings it back. There may be something in your idea that it's the charm itself that works. I think it's fair that I should have it next, for it was my idea that you should hire it out. I'll pay the usual rate. And really I want to try it badly. A woman I've been keen on for years keeps giving me the cold shoulder, and then not giving it me—just the cold shoulder, not the hearty cold shoulder that *you* give me. The charm might work for me and turn the scale, don't you think?"

Miss Timmins felt a queer, keen twinge of discomfort when he told her his desire. What did it matter to her? But she was, above all things, just; the hiring out of the disk had been his idea and profitable; he had a prior claim on the use of it.

"It might work for you," she said primly, without displaying any warm interest in the matter.

"Of course, I wouldn't do anything in the way of loosing the force. You want it yourself for that. But the disk worked so quickly with Harmiston that I have an idea that it has a power apart from that. Of course, it made Lady Kellingworth auto-suggest, probably. But why shouldn't it make me?" he said hopefully.

"Why shouldn't it?" said Miss Timmins in a tone of complete indifference; and she promised to let him have the charm as soon as Lady Kellingworth brought it back—in spite of the waiting list.

He went away very pleased, saying that she was an angel and he would hurry Lady Kellingworth up. When he had gone she found herself considering his design with growing discomfort. Of course, she had always known that his declaring, as he had so often declared, that he adored her was all nonsense; also that, even if it were not quite all nonsense, as his eyes and intonation had made her fancy sometimes, there could not be anything really serious in a young nobleman who had twice figured in the divorce court. But, somehow or other, this idea of a woman, an actual woman, on whom, as he phrased it, he had been keen for years, a woman whom he really wanted to fall in love with him, was astonishingly distasteful to her.

She tried hard to rid herself of this feeling; she told herself that it was perfectly silly, many times. But slowly and to her surprise, her unpleasant surprise, the knowledge came to her that, in addition to the sane and practical Miss Timmins, who worked so hard to make a living by selling objects of art and took such a sensible view of agreeable, cheerful, irresponsible young noblemen and their idle protestations, there was quite another Miss Timmins, deeper down, who was disposed to set quite another value on those protestations; disposed, indeed, to set a high value on them and crave something in the nature of a fulfilment of them. She was rather horrified, naturally, by this discovery and at once, in something of a

panic, set about repressing this second Miss Timmins with drastic severity. Presently, it was borne in upon her that this was an uncommonly difficult thing to do.

For the rest of that day, and the day after it, she found herself brooding with a growing discontent and irritation on this woman. Who could she be? She did not think that she could be the pretty dark lady with whom she had seen Lord Scredington at Thibault's. He had not had the air of desiring keenly that that lady should fall in love with him. It was most likely someone else, and there was very little likelihood of her learning who. He knew so many women.

Three days later Lady Kellingworth brought back the charm. She came into the shop, looking less shy, and when she gave back the disk to Miss Timmins, thanking her for having let her have it, she told her happily that she was engaged to be married. She seemed too happy to keep the good news to herself: the world must share it. Miss Timmins congratulated her with heartfelt pleasure, and since Lady Kellingworth was bent on showing her gratitude, sold her a small, good powder-blue vase for ten guineas.

CHAPTER XVIII

BLACK MAGIC

MISS TIMMINS was not at all pleased to have the greatest love charm in the world back. There was trouble between the two Miss Timmins's. The first Miss Timmins was all for ringing Lord Scredington up and telling him that Lady Kellingworth had brought back the charm and for receiving twenty pounds for the loan of it from him; the second Miss Timmins was for doing nothing of the kind. Before evening the second Miss Timmins was in full control and the second Miss Timmins was furious. Why should this woman, who had been shilly-shallying all these years have the benefit of the charm? She could not be interested, really interested, in Lord Scredington; that was why he was not really interested in her. Probably, he would get into trouble again. It was any odds that this woman was a married woman; if she had been single, she would not have shilly-shallied at all.

Then the democrat, probably a social-democrat, in Miss Timmins came to the fore. The second Miss Timmins was more of a democrat than the first. "Why," she asked herself hotly, "should these swells

always have everything and she nothing? Of course this woman had a dozen men running after her and a husband as well." Why couldn't she leave Lord Scredington alone? He was much better without her. It was the second Miss Timmins who took this rather prejudiced view of the matter; certainly, it was the second Miss Timmins who, in a final access of indignation, tampered with the forbidden things and did that with the jade disk which should let loose the force.

She fell asleep in a triumphant mood and awoke in a panic. What had she gone and done? she asked herself. As she dressed, she kept looking at the jade charm, which lay in front of her mirror, with an immense uneasiness—at least, the first Miss Timmins did. But even the second Miss Timmins was rather abashed and inclined to wish that she had let the forbidden things be, without getting as far as actually wishing it. But the thing was done and there was no undoing it—"Worse luck!" said the first Miss Timmins. "Thank goodness!" said the second Miss Timmins, finally.

The first Miss Timmins was strongly tempted to bury the charm fathoms deep in the back-yard—it was plain to her that the least she could do was not to let it out of her possession. Unfortunately, it was no less plain that, having promised to let Lord Scredington have it, she had to fulfil that promise. The sacred nature of this obligation was very much plainer to the second Miss Timmins than to the first.

But when Lord Scredington did arrive, cheerful and debonair, Miss Timmins met him with a wholly

untroubled countenance. No one could have guessed that her spirit was in any turmoil, much less that she had actually tampered with the forbidden things and believed, or very nearly believed, that she had given to those sinister forces that lie behind the quiet veil of the commonplace world an outlet through the jade disk.

Miss Timmins was able to keep her face the more serene because she had made up her mind to postpone the evil day by not telling him that Lady Kellingworth had brought it back. But he had learnt that she had brought it back, and he asked for it eagerly. She saw no use in shilly-shallying; she had promised him the charm; she unlocked the drawer in which it was. As she gave it to him the second Miss Timmins was very much to the fore, defiant, curious, mischievous, almost recklessly triumphant.

She took it, wrapped in the orange silk, from the little tortoiseshell incense box and held it out to him. He looked just a trifle surprised and taken aback at the readiness with which she was giving it to him; then he asked her to make a small bag out of the orange silk, since he proposed to carry the charm in his waistcoat pocket. It was undoubtedly the second Miss Timmins who told him to hang it round his neck, as Lady Kellingworth had done, by the silk cord with which she had fitted it. He protested that he could not do that at the moment without untying his tie, unfastening his collar, fastening it, and retying his tie; and as she sewed a piece of the silk into a bag, he discussed gleefully the probable effects of the charm upon the lady on whom he had set his heart.

It was probably the two Miss Timminses who bade him be careful that the biter was not bit.

"But I'm always being bitten," he said simply.

He went away even more cheerful and debonair than he had come, leaving her excited, immensely curious, and rather fearful. About twenty minutes later it occurred to her that she had found Lord Scredington, not in love, uncommonly difficult to handle; how much more difficult to handle would he be if he were in love—unless, of course, it had a softening effect on him. Knowing him as she did, she could not bring herself to believe that it would have that effect on him.

In the course of the next thirty-six hours her excitement abated, but she found herself in a curious suspense. Then came a more curious and growing anxiety. She found herself wondering impatiently when he would come again and even listening for his footfall on the pavement of Devonshire Street. This disquieted her. She had never listened for his footfall before; most often she had been ready to glower upon him when he did come.

Suppose—suppose the greatest love charm in the world had a double kick to it!

It was a supposition that scared the first Miss Timmins; the second, triumphantly defiant, stated that she did not care a bit.

Then two mornings after that statement, when Miss Timmins, polishing a crystal pendant, looked up to see Lord Scredington standing in the doorway, her heart gave the most curious kind of jump. She had never known it jump like that before. That

jump had an odd effect on her; her cheeks were suffused with the loveliest flush, and her startled eyes shone more brightly than December stars.

She saw Lord Scredington start too and stare at her with eyes full of a great surprise, as if they saw some change in her, some delightful change. He came forward with that pleased, surprised look still on his face; and though, to her immense annoyance, she was still blushing, the first Miss Timmins contrived to greet him without any warmth in her tone, though she was not quite sure what the second Miss Timmins was doing with her eyes. He certainly smiled as if the second Miss Timmins was doing something rather pleasing with her eyes.

There was a change in his manner; hearing him and seeing him, no one could have supposed that he had ever called her "Baby" or "Beulah, darling." The first Miss Timmins made a gallant effort and got the second Miss Timmins well under control—at least, she tried to believe that she had, though she had an uneasy feeling that the second Miss Timmins was still doing things with her eyes. He stayed for a long time talking to her, for the most part about herself. The change in his manner grew more and more definite. He contrived to convey to her that he had the greatest esteem for her character and the greatest admiration of her beauty. He did not put either of these feelings into so many words; he just conveyed them to her. His eyes were of great help to him in doing this.

He stayed a long while, nearly an hour and a half, and seemed uncommonly loth to go. Then he invited

her to lunch with him at Thibault's and stay on to dinner and spend the afternoon and evening dancing with him. The second Miss Timmins, quite reckless, was for accepting; the first Miss Timmins dared not risk it; she needed time; she must think out what had happened. She said that she could not leave the shop, and stuck to it. At last he went away with a rather gloomy air, as he had often done before, but this time he did not obviously shake off his gloom the moment he stepped out of the shop door; he did not sit quite as upright in his car as he was wont to do. Then there was something in the nature of a row between the two Miss Timminses.

He came back, appearing suddenly, at five o'clock. The sight of him produced the same strange cardiac symptoms in Miss Timmins.

She had just made tea, and she left the door at the back of the shop open, as she came into it. Through it her father caught sight of Lord Scredington and at once came into the shop and invited him to have tea with them. Lord Scredington might have waited for her to second the invitation. He did nothing of the kind. He walked straight into the parlour.

Mr. Timmins had invited him to tea because he desired a cheerful hour. Lord Scredington gratified his desire; Mr. Timmins laughed more often than he had laughed during the previous fortnight. Lord Scredington's attitude to the world and his views about the people who inhabited it seemed to him astonishingly humorous.

Then Lord Scredington behaved in a wholly

treacherous fashion; he invited Miss Timmins to dine with him at Thibault's and dance afterwards. The first Miss Timmins promptly refused, but she was practically forced to accept because her father, it his ignorance of the second Miss Timmins, said that there was no earthly reason why she should not go. He said that it would do her good. The second Miss Timmins was inclined to riot; the first Miss Timmins was disgusted at being so trapped.

Lord Scredington stayed till seven. Most of the time he talked to Mr. Timmins, but he looked at Miss Timmins all the time. He looked at her with that queer expression of finding her different, different in some attractive way; also the expression seemed to be growing a trifle hungry. It could not be that the love charm was really working, that he was developing a craving.

At seven he went away to dress. Miss Timmins put on the very prettiest of her new frocks, a frock she had not worn before. She could find no fault with the effect of it. At a quarter to eight Lord Scredington called for her in his car and drove her to Thibault's. Only when she sat down and slipped off her wrap did he get the full effect of the new frock; it, or rather Miss Timmins in it, seemed to have a rather dazing effect on him.

They dined and then they danced. As always, when she was his guest, he was pleasingly respectful; but there was a new note in his voice, a caressing note, and a kind of veiled fire in his caressing eyes. Though she was well aware of the danger, Miss Timmins was enjoying herself more than ever she

had enjoyed herself in his company ; and he appeared to be enjoying himself as he had never enjoyed himself before in her company. His eyes became almost adoring. But then a rather reckless air suited Miss Timmins and enhanced her charm, and she was looking uncommonly ravishing. More than once she found herself really thrilling.

The dancing came to an end much too soon for both of them, and he drove her back to Devonshire Street. He did not, as usual, leave her on the threshold of the shop ; he came into it with her, and she switched on the electric light. They looked at one another with rather bemused eyes. Abruptly, he caught her to him and kissed her as he had never kissed her before. Her lips clung to his for a moment, and she quivered. He loosed her, said goodnight, and went to the door of the shop rather quickly. On the threshold he turned to look at her with eyes still bemused.

Miss Timmins was looking at him queerly. There was a faint light of triumph in her eyes, and her lips were curved in a delicate arrogance.

He seemed to awake ; the bemused air lifted from his face ; the light of understanding shone in his eyes as, in a rather breathless voice, he cried : " Why—why—you little horror ! You've set that charm working ! "

Miss Timmins made one leap for the door of the shop, was through it, snapped it to, turned the key in half a breath.

Lord Scredington beat on it gently with the flat of his hand and cried through it : " I must kiss you

again, darling! It was for you I borrowed the charm—only for you! I swear it was! I've loved you for months and months!"

It could not be true; and the first Miss Timmins knew that it could not be true.

But the second Miss Timmins unlocked the door.

On the instant she was in his arms again and he was kissing her and kissing her, and, crushed against him, she was not shrinking from his kisses. He lifted her off her feet and was carrying her to the parlour, when the door of Mr. Timmins's bedroom opened.

"Aren't you coming to bed, Beulah?" he said.

Fortunately, the door of the shop had closed, and they were in darkness.

How Miss Timmins found the voice to say: "Yes, Dad," she did not know.

"Wait! Wait!" whispered Lord Scredington.

"No, no! Go! Go!" muttered Miss Timmins, twisted out of his arms, ran up the stairs into her bedroom and locked the door.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CATASTROPHE

SLEEP was a long while coming to Miss Timmins; she had been disturbed to the very depths of her being; she had to simmer down to tranquillity. On awaking next morning she felt a great sense of relief. She realised that she had had a rather wonderful escape, and was profoundly grateful for it. She perceived also, very clearly, that she must never run such a risk again. From some temptations flight is the only way of escape. She resolved that she would never run such a risk—not without regret, but very firmly. She knew also that it would be hard, that the night before had made it very much harder; but she knew that she would stick to that resolve.

She knew this; but, sure of herself as she was, deep down in her there was a faint fear. She wished that she had not tampered with the forbidden things and let loose the force of the greatest love charm in the world.

After breakfast she felt that she could not bear the confinement of the shop; she must be out in the fresh air. Therefore, she went out to hunt through

the shops of the small dealers and the sellers of junk.

She had been gone about two hours when Tom Anderson came into the shop, with rather a troubled face, to find Mr. Timmins sitting behind the counter and reading the last number of the *Anglo-Israelite*.

"Good morning, Mr. Timmins. Is Beulah in?" he said.

Mr. Timmins's eyes rose reluctantly from his book and stared at Tom and slowly perceived him.

"Ah—Tom," he said. "Good morning, Tom, what was it you said?"

"I asked: is Beulah in?"

"No. She's gone out to try to pick up something in the junk shops," said Mr. Timmins.

Tom moved across the shop on rather uncertain feet; then he said, with half-hearted interest: "How's business, Mr. Timmins?"

"Well, Beulah hasn't complained lately, so I suppose it's good," said Mr. Timmins in judicial accents.

"It *must* be good if Beulah doesn't complain. She always wants the earth," said Tom, rather bitterly.

"Not the earth, Tom. I've never heard her ask for the earth. All she ever asks for is a comfortable living," Mr. Timmins protested.

"Well, that takes a bit of making, nowadays," said Tom gloomily.

He moved about uncertainly; then he picked up a Chinese chair and examined it carefully.

Then he shook it and set it down and said: "A

good piece of work—nothing machine-made about that." He paused, then added: "I suppose you've heard about your friend, Mr. Kettleby?"

"What about him? I expected him to come round last night and the night before, but he never came," said Mr. Timmins. Then his tone grew suddenly anxious, and he added: "I hope he hasn't had an accident."

"No. He's only done a bunk—cleared out, owing everybody money," said Tom in a tone of gloomy gratification.

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Mr. Timmins indignantly. "Kettleby's the last man in the world to do anything of the kind! Why, you won't find a sounder Brit in the whole of England. He has every stage of the migration of the lost tribes at his fingers' ends, dates and everything."

"Well, he's migrating himself now. And I can't say I'm very much surprised. He was always a bit too smooth spoken for me, was Kettleby," said Tom in the tone of a man pleased that his poor opinion of Mr. Kettleby had been justified.

"I don't believe a word of it!" Mr. Timmins protested yet more indignantly.

The door of the shop opened and Miss Timmins entered, looking all the better for the fresh air.

"Hullo, Tom! Good morning," she said cheerfully. "Now you can go and read in peace, Dad. I'll look after the shop."

Mr. Timmins walked slowly to the back of the shop; at the door he turned and said: "I don't believe a word you've told me about Abiram Kettleby,

Tom. He'll come back and pay everybody. You mark my words."

He went through the door with an air of gentle dignity and along the passage to the parlour.

"What has old Kettleby been doing?" said Miss Timmins in a tone of moderate interest.

"A bunk—owing everybody all round," said Tom in the same tone of gratification.

"That doesn't surprise me," said Miss Timmins. "I never had any use for old Kettleby. But Dad thought there was nobody like him because he was so keen on the lost tribes of Israel. If he's a specimen of them, it's a pity they were ever found. All the same, Dad will miss him."

"It's more than anyone else will. All they'll miss is their money. But I thought I'd come round and tell you," said Tom. "Would you like to go to the pictures to-night?"

Miss Timmins hesitated. She had a strong feeling that Lord Scredington would come round to the shop some time during the day, and she could imagine the mood in which he would come. She would have to let him down gently, but she would have a trying time.

She said: "Thanks very much, but I don't feel like the pictures to-day somehow."

Tom frowned upon her and said gloomily: "Going out with Lord Scredington again, I suppose?"

"It's the first I've heard of it," said Miss Timmins lightly.

Once more Tom remembered that in the end honest worth comes into its own, and he said indul-

gently: "Ah, well, you're one of those who must have their fling, and I know you'll never go very far. You've got your head screwed on your shoulders and you're too cold-blooded. So long." And he bustled out of the shop.

She frowned after him. Perhaps she was cold-blooded; perhaps not. At any rate, she was going to seem cold-blooded.

She went into the parlour to take off her hat and coat and Mr. Timmins said: "You don't think there's any truth in Tom's story about Abiram Kettleby's having run away owing money, do you?"

"Why, I should think it's just the thing he would do," said Miss Timmins frankly.

"But he had four hundred pounds a little over a month ago," said Mr. Timmins.

"He never had any four hundred pounds a little over a month ago, or ever, Dad!" exclaimed Miss Timmins in a tone of profound conviction. "That's what he told you."

"But he did. I know it for a fact. And he couldn't have got through four hundred pounds in that time," said Mr. Timmins.

"He could have had a jolly good try."

"No, no, you're prejudiced against him—prejudiced," said Mr. Timmins in a tone of disapproval.

"I may be, Dad—and again, I may not," said Miss Timmins.

She went back to the shop to dust and polish and gave no more thought to the matter.

Presently Sir Charles Goulceby came in, looking uncommonly worried. His was one of those faces

which lend themselves to the worried look, and most of the time he went about the world looking sorry for himself.

“Good morning, Miss Timmins,” he said querulously. “That disreputable nephew of mine told me last night that you had three very nice pieces of lacquer. You never wrote to tell me that you had three nice pieces of lacquer, and I particularly asked you to write to me whenever you got a nice piece.”

“I haven’t been writing to any customers lately. I like to write to a lot at once and get it all done with,” said Miss Timmins amiably.

“And play them off against one another. What?” said Sir Charles even more grumpily. “Let me see the three pieces.”

Without any show of briskness, Miss Timmins showed them to him. As a matter of fact she had had no intention of letting Sir Charles see them till she had shown them to all the other customers who bought lacquer from her, for she would get less profit out of him than out of any of them. Sir Charles examined them carefully and asked the price of each piece. Since, following her usual practice with him, Miss Timmins asked double the sum she was prepared to take, he cried out in horror and thrust the three pieces away from him. Then he began to haggle, and in the end bought the smallest piece for half what she had asked for it. Even then he was almost tearful at having to pay so much for it.

As always, or nearly always, Miss Timmins was kind to him; she said in a soothing tone: “Never mind, Sir Charles. You’ve got a very nice piece of

lacquer—a very nice piece of lacquer. It's small, but it's about as good as it can be."

"It's *very* small," moaned Sir Charles. He looked from it to her face and added: "Have you considered that suggestion I made to you a couple of months ago, that you should come to me as curator of my collection and catalogue it and look after it and help me with your advice about what to buy and what not to buy, when I'm adding to it?"

"I thought you were joking," said Miss Timmins in some surprise.

"I wasn't joking at all," said Sir Charles indignantly. "I'd as soon have your judgment about a piece as that of anyone I know in London, nearly. I'm always being swindled, and you'd save me hundreds a year—hundreds."

Miss Timmins had given no thought to the suggestion because she had no intention of accepting it. She had no desire to lose her freedom and she was quite sure that, however much Sir Charles paid her, he would see that he got a great deal more out of her than it was worth and that he would be a most unpleasant person to work for, impossible to satisfy.

She smiled upon him kindly, and said: "I'm afraid my handwriting wouldn't be good enough for the cataloguing."

"That's of no importance. The catalogue can always be typed. And it's most important that you should come. You'd certainly save me hundreds a year."

"I certainly should," said Miss Timmins frankly. "But I don't think the post would suit me."

"Why ever not?" said Sir Charles. "You'd get your food—very good food—two comfortable rooms and four pounds a week."

"But I'd rather stay here," said Miss Timmins with decision. "It's so much more exciting being a dealer. You never go for a walk without wondering what you'll find; you never go to a sale without wondering what you'll get. And the thrill of getting a really nice lot, for which you've got a good customer, knocked down to you cheap! And then there's getting people to pay the price you want."

"And a confounded price you make them pay," said Sir Charles bitterly.

"No I don't. I *never* ask too much," Miss Timmins protested.

"You always ask *me* too much," said Sir Charles more bitterly.

"Ah, but you're different," said Miss Timmins in a soothing tone. "And, anyhow, I don't get it."

"No. But you always get a great deal more than I want to give. And think how much better you'd be off with four pounds a week and rooms and food. Look what a lot of money you'd have to spend on your clothes and amusing yourself."

"I'd much rather have a great deal less and stay here," said Miss Timmins firmly.

"Nonsense!" snapped Sir Charles. "Pure contrariness!"

There came into the shop a stout, pugnacious-looking gentleman of fifty, wearing a black morning coat, dark grey trousers, brown boots and a bowler hat.

"Timmins in?" he said in aggressive accents.

Miss Timmins did not like his looks or his manner, and she said coldly: "Yes."

"I want to see him on a little matter o' business," said the gentleman.

"I do all the buying and selling here," said Miss Timmins.

"This ain't a matter o' buyin' an' sellin'; it's a matter o' lendin' and payin'. I wanter see Timmins 'imself," said the gentleman.

"Lending and paying?" said Miss Timmins sharply. "What's your name?"

"Buccleugh—Alistair Buccleugh," said the gentleman; but his accent was not Scots, it was cockney.

Miss Timmins hesitated; then she stepped to the door at the back of the shop and called through it: "Dad! A gentleman wants to see you—Mr. Alistair Buccleugh."

She went back behind the counter and Sir Charles strolled across the shop to look at a print on the wall. Mr. Alistair Buccleugh looked at a bronze Buddha with a contemptuous and even supercilious air.

Mr. Timmins came into the shop and exchanged greetings with Mr. Buccleugh.

Then Mr. Buccleugh said in his rough, unpleasant voice: "I've called about that little loan. The first month's int'rest, twenty pound, was due yesterday, an' neither you nor Kettleby sent it along; so I thought I'd come and git it. I've just bin round to Kettleby's lodgin's, since 'e was the one to negoshiate the loan an' I myde out the cheque to 'im—him.

An' I found as 'e'd left, an' nobody seemed to know where 'e'd gone. So I came stryete on to you."

"But I don't know where he has gone. He didn't even tell me that he was going. I can't tell you where he is," said Mr. Timmins.

"It don't matter where 'e is. I didn't come to see you about 'im—him—I come about the money—the twenty pound interest."

"You came to me? But I don't understand. What has it got to do with me?" said Mr. Timmins.

"Well, seeing as 'ow—how—the loan was to you and Kettleby an' this little plyce o' yourn is the security I lent it on, I should think it 'ad a lot to do with you," said Mr. Buccleugh with a cold incisiveness.

Miss Timmins had been listening in a frowning bewilderment. She came from behind the counter and said: "But I don't understand. What loan are you talking about? You've not been borrowing money, Dad?"

"No, my dear. Certainly not," said Mr. Timmins.

"Now, now, Timmins; that won't do, you know. It was a joint loan to you and Kettleby—all perfectly reg'lar an' in order. You 'ad your share o' the money; you must 'ave done," said Mr. Buccleugh.

"I never had a penny of the money. Abiram Kettleby had it all. He was the borrower—not I. I only signed the papers to help him to get the money," protested Mr. Timmins. "He told me that my signing was just a matter of form to help him to arrange the loan, and that he only wanted the money for a couple of months."

"I guessed that Kettleby could tell the tyle. But

'e 'asn't pyde the money nor the int'rest on it. An' it's the int'rest I've come for. If 'e 'asn't pyde it, you've got to, Timmins. It's quite reg'lar an' in order. You're responsible, you are," said Mr. Buccleugh in rather incisive accents.

Miss Timmins had been listening to their talk in a growing disquiet. Looking uncommonly scared, she said in scared accents: "How much is the loan?"

"With the int'rest up to date, it's fower 'undred an' twenty pound," said Mr. Buccleugh.

"But Abiram only borrowed four hundred pounds. I remember that distinctly," said Mr. Timmins.

"That was a month ago. There's twenty pound int'rest on that. Twenty pound a month the int'rest is. I want it," said Mr. Buccleugh.

"Twenty pounds a month? Why, that's two hundred and forty a year!" cried Miss Timmins.

"That's right," said Mr. Buccleugh.

"But I haven't got any two hundred and forty pounds a year for interest. I never had the money and I won't pay it!" cried Mr. Timmins, of a sudden almost bellicose.

"'Ere; I don't like the look of this!" said Mr. Buccleugh. "Kettleby told me that you were a man o' substance, Timmins, and you were there and 'eard 'im yourself."

"So I am—some substance. This house is mine," said Mr. Timmins.

"Well, I can't say much for the 'ouse an' I can't say much for the neighbour'ood. The question is am I goin' to git my money?"

"You're not going to get it from me," said Mr. Timmins with decision.

"You're certainly not going to get a penny till we know where we stand," said Miss Timmins with equal decision.

"Then I'll call in this loan, an' I'll call it in strypte awye, as I'm intitled to. This 'ouse an' this stuff will easily bring in my four 'undred and twenty pound, and I'll be glad to be shut o' the business," said Mr. Buccleugh. Then he turned on Mr. Timmins and roared: "Representin' yerself as a man o' substance, you—you—miserable fower-'undred-pounder! It's fraudulent misrepresentation, that's wot it is! We're allus up agin it! Allus bein' done down by miserable pikers like you an' that Kettleby o' yours! If I don't get my twenty pound before Friday I puts in the brokers and sells the 'ouse over your 'eads!"

With a terrible air he walked to the shop door and opened it and paused on the threshold.

"There'll be costs too, an' don't yer ferget it!" he added, and went out of the door and slammed it behind him.

CHAPTER XX

MISS TIMMINS CHANGES HER WAY OF LIFE

THE charming colour had ebbed from Miss Timmins's cheeks; she stared at her father with seared eyes, and in a faint voice said: "Whatever have you done, Dad? We shall be sold up."

"I didn't understand what I was doing, my dear," said Mr. Timmins in miserable accents.

"But why ever did you do it without telling me?" she said in a tone she tried to keep clear of reproach.

"Abiram particularly asked me not to. He made a great point of it. He said you had a prejudice against him," said Mr. Timmins.

"I had—and I have," said Miss Timmins bitterly.

"And you seem to have had a very good reason for it," said Sir Charles Goulceby, coming forward.

"No, no, Sir Charles; you're wrong, you're all wrong," protested Mr. Timmins. "This is all a mistake. Abiram must have forgotten the twenty pounds."

"The old rogue wouldn't forget twenty pence," said Miss Timmins bitterly.

"It will be all right—quite all right," Mr. Timmins

protested hopefully. "Abiram will pay; he'll pay the interest and the loan too. He isn't the kind of man to leave a fellow Brit in the lurch like this."

Miss Timmins wrung her hands and said with bitter conviction: "He'll never pay—never."

Sir Charles coughed and said suavely: "I have a suggestion to make, which should help you out of the difficulty. You must have some money in the bank, and if Miss Timmins will accept my offer and become the curator of my collection and help me with her advice in buying additions to it, I'll find the money to take over the balance of this loan, and we'll pay off this man Buccleugh now, and you shall pay me off at your leisure."

He beamed upon them.

"You will, Sir Charles? But that is good of you!" said Miss Timmins quickly in grateful accents.

"It is indeed," said Mr. Timmins. "And Abiram will pay you every penny of it," he added with generous conviction.

"We'll leave your friend Abiram out of it, if you don't mind, Mr. Timmins," said Sir Charles sharply. "I prefer to rely on you and Miss Timmins for the payment of the money. I'll lend it to you on the same security—this house and shop and the stock in it and charge you ten per cent. interest on it, instead of the sixty you'd have to pay this money-lender. How much money do you think you have in the bank?"

"A hundred and thirty pounds fifteen and ninepence," said Miss Timmins.

"That's better than I expected," said Sir Charles,

and there was a note of relief in his tone. "You shall pay me thirty pounds a quarter, Mr. Timmins; and instead of paying Miss Timmins three pounds a week as my curator and adviser, I'll pay her a pound a week; and the other two pounds shall be deducted from the loan. What do you say, Miss Timmins?"

"But you offered me four pounds a week, Sir Charles," said Miss Timmins.

"Ah, yes; but the circumstances were different—very different," said Sir Charles.

Miss Timmins looked at him steadily, and no little of the gratefulness faded from her face. She said slowly: "Yes, I was free to choose."

"Exactly," said Sir Charles quickly. "And then look at the risk I am running. This place——"

He waved his hand round the shop and shrugged his shoulders.

"It was good enough security for four hundred pounds for that man Buccleugh," said Miss Timmins.

"It's his business to run risks. These money-lenders are all gamblers," said Sir Charles quickly. "Well, that's my offer—businesslike, but friendly and fair. Why, in less than two years you'll have cleared off the debt, interest and all. What do you say, Mr. Timmins?"

"A very handsome offer, Sir Charles," said Mr. Timmins, immensely grateful, "and I accept it in the spirit in which it is offered. And, so, I'm sure, does Beulah. Don't you, Beulah?"

"Yes. I accept it in the spirit in which it is offered. I've got to," said Miss Timmins slowly and without warmth.

"Excellent," said Sir Charles, rubbing his long and rather claw-like hands together. "Excellent. I'll put my lawyers on to the business at once. You needn't look for any trouble from this man Buccleugh. They'll make short work of him, I can promise you. Good morning—good morning."

He went out of the shop in great spirits. He had found a pleasing ten per cent. investment for three hundred pounds, and he had secured the services of Miss Timmins, on whom he could rely to save him hundreds a year, at three pounds a week instead of four. He was glowing with all the warmth of a generous benefactor.

The door had not closed behind him for more than a second before Miss Timmins said: "Mean old brute! Pretending to be generous."

The words did not speak well for the future relations of employer and employed, and Mr. Timmins gazed at her with an expression of pain.

"My-dear!" he said in a tone of shocked reproach.

Miss Timmins said nothing. She looked at him as humane persons look at a lamb, or a very young chicken, or some other gentle young animal. She often looked at him like that.

Then she said, with every appearance of cheerfulness: "Well, anyhow, we've got out of the mess."

She turned and picked up the wash-leather with which she had been polishing objects of art, and Mr. Timmins went back into the parlour to the last issue of the *Anglo-Israelite*.

But Miss Timmins was very far from cheerful. Thanks to those extraordinary pieces of luck, she

had been enjoying, for the first time in her thinking life, a certain sense of security. It had gone. Again the future had grown uncertain; the struggle to keep the shop going to make a living for her father and herself had again begun. And with that sense of security her freedom had gone too; she would be at the beck and call of a very unpleasant master.

As Sir Charles had promised, his lawyers made short work of Mr. Alistair Buccleugh. His loan was paid off and a hundred and twenty pounds were transferred from the account of Mr. Timmins to the account of Sir Charles Goulceby. In ten days Miss Timmins moved to Sir Charles's house in South Street and took up her duties.

Quick and adaptable, she was presently discharging them with sufficient satisfaction to herself. As she had expected, Sir Charles was a hard and tiresome employer. A mistake in spelling, and for all that she had worked hard at school, spelling was not Miss Timmins's strongest point, would annoy him bitterly; and once annoyed, Sir Charles could rise to the very peaks of irritability. Moreover, now that he had this excellent adviser to hand, he busied himself adding to his collection with an industry he had never before displayed.

Lord Scredington did come round on the afternoon of the catastrophe, and he came jubilant, expecting to find Miss Timmins in a kindly, even affectionate temper. He found her troubled and depressed; and she would only tell him that it was business that was worrying her and would not tell him how or why it was worrying her, or accept his offers of help. She

was sure that, if she told him, he would insist on paying off Sir Charles's three hundred pounds and lending it to them himself; she was resolved that nothing in the world should induce her take a penny, out of the way of business, from him.

What was worse, she refused to accept his pressing invitation to come to Thibault's and be cheered up, and she even said, in a tone that gave him every reason to believe that she meant it, that she would not be able to come to Thibault's any more. He perceived that, in a reaction from the ecstasy of the night before, she was really frightened, and that he would have to wait till she recovered her confidence in herself. Anything in the way of immediate pressure would only make her more fearful and strengthen her in her resolve to take no more risks. He came away in a bitter disappointment that surprised him; he had been looking forward to being with her and dancing with her with a keener desire than he had known. He had a suspicion that he had grown fonder of her than he had known. Could that infernal love charm really—

Then he was immensely surprised by the sudden change in her manner of living, her going to Sir Charles's to deal with his collection and advise him about adding to it. She would only tell him that she was doing it for business reasons, and since he did not know and could not learn what those business reasons were, for she had forbidden her father to tell him, and it was the last matter in the world that Sir Charles desired to talk about, there was nothing he could do about it. He had a strong suspicion, in

fact, he was nearly sure, that his uncle was getting very much the better of the arrangement, whatever it might be, but he was helpless in the matter. He had to content himself with adding it to his score against his uncle and with waiting for one of those chances, which he never missed, of paying it off. Nevertheless, his helplessness chafed him.

Consequently, he and Miss Timmins saw very much less of one another than he desired. She was working most of the day ; the evenings, unless Tom Anderson was keeping him company, she spent with her father ; for now that he had lost his friend Kettleby, he found himself very lonely. Also, she had to discuss with him a number of business details, sales and prices and the replacing of objects of art as they were sold by new ones. To this she attended herself, for she had no difficulty in getting the time to attend sales, since Sir Charles, in view of his three hundred pounds, desired that the business should go as well as it could without the constant supervision of Miss Timmins.

But though he could no longer go round to the shop in the morning and afternoon to talk to her, it was surprising how often Lord Scredington contrived to see her. The fact that he was anything but a welcome guest in his uncle's house did not prevent him from becoming a frequent visitor to it. It was surprising also how often he contrived to visit it when his uncle was not in it ; and it was surprising, or perhaps it was not, how often the butler or the footman who admitted him forgot to tell Sir Charles that he had called. When, on occasion, Sir Charles

did find him in the room in which he kept the chief of his treasures and in which Miss Timmins did her work, Lord Scredington had always come to ask his opinion of a small object of art, which he had recently purchased and was carrying in his pocket, or he had felt compelled to refresh his memory of some piece that his uncle prized highly. At the same time he did nothing to destroy his self respect by being scrupulously civil to his uncle.

At first Sir Charles bore these incursions of his nephew almost amiably. But when he dashed into his treasure room for the seventh time to find Lord Scredington waiting for him, he asked himself was that idle young nobleman wasting the time of Miss Timmins, for which he was paying her salary. He grew annoyed. He told Lord Scredington that he could not have Miss Timmins's time wasted, and refused to believe him when he declared that in the presence of Miss Timmins he preserved always the hushed silence of admiring awe, and, consequently did not waste her time at all.

When Sir Charles hotly reproached Miss Timmins also for allowing her time to be wasted, she pointed out that the treasure room was not her room and she had no power to turn Sir Charles's visitors out of it. She also pointed out that it was in the power of Sir Charles to forbid Lord Scredington the room: that there were other rooms in the house in which he could await the return of his uncle.

Sir Charles did forbid Lord Scredington to wait for him in the treasure room and told him that he could wait in the library and improve his mind, if, indeed,

he had a mind to improve, which he greatly doubted, by reading a book. Lord Scredington protested that the treasure room was the only room in the house which contained objects of real interest to him and which really did improve his mind. Three days later Sir Charles came in to find him waiting to show him a rose-quartz cloak-hook. He was very short with him and when he went was very bitter with Miss Timmins for encouraging him to waste the time for which he was paying her. He forbade her, in spite of her protests that she never did anything of the kind, to encourage him in any way.

Lord Scredington enjoyed these visits to Miss Timmins; indeed, he had a suspicion that he would have found life uncommonly empty without them. But he felt that they were merely a makeshift, that he had no great joy from them. He was dismayed by the change in her attitude to him; it was kindlier, but, in spite of that, far more aloof. He felt that after that sweeping away of the barriers between them the last night they had danced at Thibault's, a barrier had arisen which seemed impossible to break through. It chafed him, and it would chafe him worse.

One morning, about six weeks after she had come to South Street, she was polishing a jade vase. It was a fine piece, but she found no joy in polishing it: that morning the sense that she was in the painful grip of circumstance was very strong. She had nearly finished the task when the door opened and Sir Charles bustled in, in his usual nervous way, wearing an air of triumph. He carried a brown paper parcel and was unwrapping it as he came.

"A find, Miss Timmins! A real find! A mirror black vase! Not very large, but of very fine quality!" he cried in jubilant and excited accents, and his voice was high and squeaky.

Miss Timmins showed no gratification at the news. She had no desire whatever to share either Sir Charles's joys or his sorrows. She was feeling no gratitude whatever to him for his noble action, for it was paying him very well indeed. He would get his three hundred pounds back in eighteen months with ten per cent. interest, and she had already, at the end of six weeks, saved him over two hundred pounds and his collection from rubbish to that amount.

She said in unbelieving accents: "A mirror black vase, Sir Charles?"

"Yes. And I got it for twelve pounds! At Higgins's. I should have got it for twelve shillings, if he hadn't seen I was so keen on it. Thank goodness, he didn't know what it was!"

"You got it off Higgins? A mirror black vase for twelve pounds?" said Miss Timmins in yet more incredulous accents. "But what Higgins doesn't know about china isn't worth knowing. Are you sure it's all right?"

"Of course I'm sure it's all right!" snapped Sir Charles scornfully. "Do you think I could make a mistake about mirror black? Besides, he'd got it stuck on a shelf at the back of the shop among a lot of Staffordshire rubbish."

"That's where Higgins would stick it," said Miss Timmins, with a darkling air. "Directly he saw you coming," she added unkindly.

"Look at it! Look at it!" cried Sir Charles in shrill exasperation. And he thrust it at her.

She examined it carefully. Sir Charles watched her face for the look of admiration. It did not come. She flicked the vase with her finger-nail to get the ring; then she frowned at it.

"It is a dud, Sir Charles," she said coldly; there was the faintest note of satisfaction in her voice.

"Nonsense!" he snapped. "Nonsense!"

"You ought to have telephoned to me to come and look at it before you bought it. That's one of the things you pay me for, isn't it?" she said severely.

"I tell you it's genuine! I'm certain of it!" he clamoured shrilly.

"It isn't Chinese at all," said Miss Timmins with a kind of inexorable decision. "It isn't even a Japanese fake. It's French. And it's a good fake too—first class. I'd bet anything that it comes from that factory where they fake the Blue Worcester so well. I was taken in by a piece of that myself—once."

"Nonsense! Nonsense!" said Sir Charles again, but in less assured accents. "You're wrong. I'll take it to South Kensington and see what they say about it."

"Do," said Miss Timmins, in a tone of the coldest indifference. "Not that it makes any difference what they say about it. It's a French fake, and I didn't know that the French had started to fake good Chinese porcelain."

Sir Charles gazed at her with an expression almost

of malignity, an odd way to gaze at such a pretty guardian of his treasure. She caught him doing so and remained unaffected. He broke into a rather excited monologue on the rascality of dealers and the perversity of women, using Higgins as an illustration of the one and Miss Timmins as an illustration of the other. His feeling about the rascality of Higgins in letting him have for twelve pounds a vase which, if genuine, would have been worth three or four hundred, was stronger than his feeling about the perversity of Miss Timmins in refusing to believe it to be genuine.

When he stopped, Miss Timmins said in a tone of rather unpleasant finality : " Well, I'm always telling you not to buy china without my seeing it, Sir Charles. It's the trickiest thing there is."

Sir Charles replied ; but since he replied well under his breath, she really had the last word.

The door opened and the butler ushered in Lord Scredington, who was carrying a small suit case.

" How are you, uncle ? " he said with a cheeriness which was certainly not called forth by Sir Charles's scowl of greeting. " I came in to consult your invaluable curator about a piece, or should I say a lump, of chalcedony I've just bought. How are you, Miss Timmins ? "

" I'm very well, thank you," said Miss Timmins with a certain stiffness.

" Now I don't want Miss Timmins's time wasted," said Sir Charles sourly.

" I never waste Miss Timmins's time. Nothing would induce me to," protested Lord Scredington

with a virtuous air. "Besides, you wouldn't let me, would you, Miss Timmins?"

Miss Timmins said nothing.

"And I wanted you to see it, too, uncle mine. You'd like to because you haven't got anything to touch it, and you never will have—not if you go on collecting for another hundred years."

As he was speaking he was setting the suit-case on the table at which Miss Timmins was sitting, and opening it, he lifted out of it a horse carved in chalcedony.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CHALCEDONY HORSE

THE horse was over a foot long and five inches high, reclining in a posture in which a horse never yet reclined, with its legs tucked under it and its head turned and resting on its back, admirably carved, to the last hair in its mane and tail, out of a wonderful piece of the translucent, flaky stone.

Sir Charles made three quick steps to the table and stared down at the horse and gasped ; Miss Timmins's eyes opened wide, and she bent down a little to study it ; Lord Seredington looked from one to the other with an expression of triumph.

"What do you think of it ?" he said.

"It's very nice," said Miss Timmins.

"Nice ? Nice ? What a way to speak of a magnificent piece like this !" said Sir Charles scornfully.

"Well, that's what it is," said Miss Timmins.

Lord Seredington nodded : "I know what you mean," he said. "You mean it's a charming and delightful piece, but not what you call filling."

Miss Timmins nodded.

"Filling!" cried Sir Charles and snorted a terrific contempt. "Look at the work in it! Look at that mane and tail and those eyelashes! Wonderful! What did you give for it?"

"Twenty-five pounds."

"Twenty-five pounds!" Sir Charles howled.

"Well, what was I to do?" said Lord Scredington. "The dealer said it was compo. Apparently, he'd never seen chalcedony. And he was so angry when I told him that it was not compo that I had to buy the horse to soothe him. I couldn't insult him by offering more for compo."

Miss Timmins grinned at him and said: "You'll never get another bargain like it."

Sir Charles's face had suddenly become suffused with a look of geniality: "It *is* a bargain," he said. "It's a pity it's not in your line, Roger—that you only collect *small* pieces: snuff-bottles, and buckle-tongues, and so forth. You could get a good many small pieces for the price of this."

"It depends on how much I get for this," said Lord Scredington cautiously.

Sir Charles not only disliked his nephew, but he cherished a considerable contempt for his intelligence, above all for his business intelligence.

He said in generous accents: "I'll give you two hundred for it—a hundred and seventy pounds on your bargain."

Miss Timmins shook her head at Lord Scredington.

"But two thousand wouldn't be a hundred and seventy-five on my bargain; it would be more," said Lord Scredington, frowning as if engaged in arithmetic.

“Two thousand! Who said anything about two thousand?” snapped Sir Charles.

“I did,” said Lord Scredington with an amiable smile. “One always talks in thousands about a piece like this.”

“Don’t be absurd!” cried Sir Charles.

“I’m never absurd,” said Lord Scredington, coldly dignified. “But I’ll leave it to Miss Timmins. Isn’t two thousand a wretched price for a piece like this?”

Miss Timmins hesitated; then she shook her head. After all, she was in the employ of Sir Charles. She said: “You’ve got to find a customer.”

“I’ve found a customer,” said Lord Scredington confidently, nodding towards his uncle.

Sir Charles’s eyes had scarcely moved from the horse. At the moment his second name apparently appeared to be Greed. He said: “What *do* you want for it?”

“I want to take it to America—with Miss Timmins as an expert saleswoman, to sell it for me. We shall have a ripping time and clear about four thousand,” said Lord Scredington with enthusiasm.

“Don’t be an idiot!” snapped Sir Charles.

“Always this care for my intellectual welfare,” said his nephew, gratefully.

“I’ll give you a thousand for it,” said Sir Charles, and groaned.

Lord Scredington scoffed at the offer. He went on to scoff at other offers till he brought his almost weeping uncle up to two thousand.

Then he said: “Two thousand cash. That was what I had made up my mind to take for it.”

With an expression of veritable anguish Sir Charles took out his cheque-book, motioned to Miss Timmins to get out of her chair, sat down on it, and took up her pen to write the cheque.

Lord Scredington stopped him by saying, and his eyes were sparkling mischievously as he spoke: "Wait a minute, I've changed my mind. I'm going to keep it. This horse is going to bring us closer together, uncle mine. It's going to be a kind of bond of union between us. You'll always be coming round to my flat to feast your eyes on it. We shall become comrades."

"Don't be such a damned ass! You accepted my offer!" snapped Sir Charles. "Miss Timmins heard you. Didn't you, Miss Timmins?"

"Yes," said Miss Timmins honestly, but reluctantly.

"No—no. This horse has got to do this uplift job. I will never part with it till it has," said Lord Scredington firmly, laying his hand on the horse's back.

Sir Charles looked at him earnestly and perceived that he was not going to get the horse; damned his young kinsman under his breath; flung pettishly out of the room; slammed the door behind him.

The room was still trembling to the shock when Lord Scredington, in his wicked glee, grabbed at Miss Timmins. He grabbed the empty air; Miss Timmins was standing about ten feet away on the other side of the table.

"You did accept Sir Charles's offer," she said in a reproachful tone. "Why didn't you let him have the horse?"

"Because he wants it," said Lord Scredington, promptly and simply.

"You shouldn't be obstinate like that," she said severely. "It isn't as if the horse was really *it*. Then, of course, you couldn't let it go—perhaps," she paused. "But it isn't really filling—not like—not like"—she grinned at him—"that brown frog you bought from Bouncer Bosanquet."

It was a challenge. He leapt; Miss Timmins kept the table between them.

Then they turned to the horse again, admiring the amazing skill of the carving. But they decided that it was not simple enough, that it was too naturalistic to be beautiful.

"Whether you really like it or whether you don't, you ought to let your uncle have it. You did actually sell it to him, you know," she said rather severely.

He shook his head: "No," he said. "He is such a mean old brute. I'm wanting more and more to know how he got you here out of the shop. I'm perfectly certain that it was one of those shady games at which he's a fair knock-out. But you never will tell me."

"Oh, that was all right, quite all right," said Miss Timmins quickly.

Again he shook his head. But he let the subject drop and presently, after persuading her to dine with him at Thibault's on the next Friday evening, he left her.

He had not been gone three minutes, and she had fallen to work again, when Sir Charles, still flushed,

flung into the room. To have acquired a fake and failed to acquire an extraordinary fine piece in the same hour, had let loose the worst in him, and there was plenty to let loose. In a happier age he would have cut his nephew's throat from ear to ear and taken the horse away.

"So that young ruffian has gone, has he?" he growled.

"Yes," said Miss Timmins in a tone of indifference.

"I'm getting very tired of this," said Sir Charles, looking at her with an ugly eye. "It's disgraceful, the way you let that young ruffian waste your time—time for which I pay you."

"But I don't let him waste my time," Miss Timmins protested with some heat. "When he's here, waiting for you, I get on with my work just the same."

This was not exactly true; but it was true enough.

"Oh, yes, you do. I've kept a pretty close eye on your work, and I know exactly how much you do the mornings when he doesn't come and the mornings when he does. You waste a lot of time I pay you for—a lot of it," said Sir Charles, and his tone was uncommonly nasty, and he looked uncommonly nasty.

"It isn't my fault that he comes and interrupts me. I can't stop him coming here," protested Miss Timmins.

Sir Charles's face became really malignant and he snarled "Yes, you could! I'm tired of it—tired of the whole business! After the way I came to the rescue

of you and your father, I expected faithful service. Faithful service! And I'm not getting it!"

"You are. You're getting your money's worth and a great deal more," said Miss Timmins with a kind of cold fierceness, and she gazed at him with the eyes of hate.

It was not soothing, or tactful, and he glared at her as he almost shouted: "For two pins I'd instruct my lawyers to take proceedings at once to recover the money I lent your father. He's just muddling away the business, and you know it. Every time I go round to the shop I find him more muddled than ever. The only sensible thing for me to do is to recover my money at once, before he has muddled away all the stock, and the business has gone to rack and ruin. There's nothing in the terms on which I lent him the money to prevent my doing it. I'm hanged if I don't."

Miss Timmins protested no more; she went on with her work, glancing at Sir Charles with eyes that held a world of detestation. She did not quite believe that he would do as he threatened; and if he did, she felt that it would almost be better than this hateful business of working for him. At the same time she had a feeling that this fury of his was considerably forced, that he was after something, as she phrased it to herself, and she wondered what it was.

His face cleared a little, and he gave his threat time to sink in and have its full effect; he went to the cabinet full of *famille rose* porcelain and gazed with a loving eye at a teapot foolishly decorated with

foxes. The hate in the eyes of Miss Timmins became tinged with scorn. She had the lover of beauty's contempt for the pretty stuff.

Sir Charles turned suddenly, and snapped: "Why don't you make that young ruffian hand over the horse he sold me?"

"Me?" exclaimed Miss Timmins, taken aback.

"Yes, you!" said Sir Charles. "It's plain enough that he's taken a fancy to you and you could easily persuade him to let me have it."

She did not answer. He waited; then he said in detestable, carneying accents: "What's the good of your being a pretty girl if you don't make use of your advantages?"

Miss Timmins did not tell him.

He waited a little to let the suggestion sink in, then said: "If you persuade that young ruffian to sell me that horse, I won't instruct my lawyers to take action at once to recover that money."

"I don't care whether you instruct them or whether you don't," said Miss Timmins, almost icily indifferent.

She knew where she was. She had learnt by long experience the immense greed of the collector, and was really sure that as long as she could be of use to him in getting the horse, Sir Charles would never sell them up.

He ground his teeth; then he groaned; then he said—the words seemed to be dragged out of him: "Well, I tell you what: if you get that horse off that young ruffian for me, for two thousand pounds, I'll make you a present of your father's debt to me."

So that was what he was working up to and an immense hope of freedom and security welled up in her. But she only gazed at him with thoughtful, contemptuous eyes.

"I'll think about it," she said in indifferent accents.

"That's right! That's right!" he said, almost with enthusiasm. "I thought you'd see your way—I was sure of it. You're much too sensible not to. You'll not let any foolish scruples stand in your way; you'll get that horse at any cost. I know you could make that young ruffian do anything you want if you really chose to."

Miss Timmins did not thank him for his good opinion of her; she frowned at his back as he went through the doorway. As a matter of fact, she did not see her way at all. She was certainly not going to ask a favour of Lord Scredington.

But there was Sir Charles's offer—too good to be rejected, almost too good to be true. It meant freedom, escape from the detestable Sir Charles and his tedious work, back to the business fight in which her spirit delighted; above all, it meant a return to that feeling of security which she had enjoyed for so short a time. And all she had to do was to persuade Lord Scredington to keep to the definite bargain, as she considered it, that she had heard him make with her own ears.

But she was certain that there was no persuading him. He had made up his mind that Sir Charles should not have the horse, and nothing short of her making it a personal favour would induce him to change it. She cudgelled and cudgelled her brains for

a solution of the problem. Some hours later, and quite of a sudden, there came out of that cudgelling an uncommonly odd, far-fetched solution—but feasible and in keeping with Miss Timmins's rather buccaneering spirit. She would take the horse from Lord Scredington's flat and leave the two thousand pounds in its place.

Then Sir Charles and Lord Scredington could fight it out, Sir Charles being in possession of the horse and Lord Scredington having accepted his offer of two thousand pounds for it. Lord Scredington would never suspect her of taking the horse. She would hand it over to Sir Charles without telling him how exactly she had come by it—she grinned wickedly—after she had gotten his receipt for the debt, and let him keep it if he could. If he succeeded in keeping it, all was well; if he did not, she would pay off the three hundred at her leisure. She had no scruples where Sir Charles was concerned.

Her thought was that it would serve the old pig right! Then the whole plan stood out bright and clear; she grinned yet more wickedly. She would score off Sir Charles and Lord Scredington, too. When Miss Timmins was born a girl, the world lost a fair to average pirate.

Extravagant as this plan appeared, it was, thanks to her knowledge of Lord Scredington's flat, feasible. Her first meeting with him had been at that flat, when she had taken the jade jui plaque to sell to him; and, discovering that he had taken the cave-man as his model, had escaped down the fire-escape from his balcony to the garden. If she could descend that

fire-escape, she could ascend it. The question was whether she could get into the garden; was the door of it, which opened into a narrow lane, locked at night? She thought it quite likely that the people of the flats were careless about locking it.

The longer she pondered this extravagant scheme the more it pleased her. She awoke next morning resolved to carry it through. But first there was Sir Charles; she had no intention in the world of trusting him even as far as she could throw him; and that was not an inch. When he came in later to learn her decision, she made it clear to him that she would not let him have the horse till she had the receipt for the three hundred pounds. He was hurt by this evidence of her distrust; he said that his word was as good as his bond; but he promised to have it prepared by his lawyers at once and ready for her.

That night Miss Timmins ascertained that the door of the garden was not locked. The next morning she asked Sir Charles for the £2,000 in notes, declaring that in these matters cash often made all the difference. Sir Charles could not gainsay this; but he protested violently before he went round to the bank to fetch the notes. He was in such perturbation of spirit when he handed them, four five-hundred-pound notes, over to her that he never thought to ask for a receipt for them.

Miss Timmins decided to put her plan into execution that very night, for it was conveniently moonless. Besides, there were certain tremors; she wished to get it over. She bought an electric torch, a bag in

which to carry away the horse, and a pair of rubber-soled shoes. Wearing them and a dark serge coat and skirt, so as not to show up light-coloured against the wall as she ascended the fire-escape, she let herself out of Sir Charles's house at two minutes past two in the morning.

Mayfair is but a small district, and it was not three hundred yards to Lord Scredington's flat. But Miss Timmins found it a long way; her excitement was mingled with a considerable perturbation.

She was almost hoping that the garden door would be locked. It was not; she slipped through it and, making a circuit round the garden, so as to keep in the shadow, came to the fire-escape which rose to Lord Scredington's balcony. The ascent of that fire-escape was the most uncomfortable ascent she had ever made. It seemed to her that she was at least five minutes reaching the balcony, whereas she was less than a minute and a half. As she had expected, she found the long windows of the sitting-room open. The way was clear.

But she found that her heart was beating very quickly and that she was trembling. She flattened herself against the wall and took a deep breath to quiet herself. It was nearly three minutes before she had herself sufficiently under control to act. Then she stepped through the window.

She switched on her torch and ran a ray round the room. In the middle of the mantelpiece stood the chalcedony horse. She saw also that the door of Lord Scredington's bedroom was a few inches open. That was indeed disquieting; it gave her a

pause. However, there was no help for it. She let the ray rest on the horse for a good five seconds, taking in its exact position. Then she switched the light off and crossed the room quietly to the mantelpiece.

She opened the bag noiselessly and set it on the hearthrug. Then she lifted the horse from its carved wooden stand. It was heavy. She would not bother to take the wooden stand. It occurred to her that it could, later, be a matter of negotiation between Sir Charles and Lord Scredington. A shadow of a smile wreathed her lips at the thought. She put the horse in the bag and shut it noiselessly. Then she took the envelope containing the bank-notes from her pocket, and set it in the middle of the wooden stand. She breathed a sigh of relief. Half, the most difficult half, of her task was accomplished.

Then, in the next room, the bed creaked, and her heart stood still. A wave of terror surged through her that left her unable to stir. Bare feet padded across the bedroom; there was a click; the sitting-room blazed into a brightness dazzling after the dark; Lord Scredington, in blue silk pyjamas, stood on the threshold of the bedroom door.

His eyes rested on Miss Timmins in a blank astonishment. Then they moved to the empty stand of the chalcedony horse, then to the bag; and a frown that became a veritable scowl furrowed his brow.

"Don't try to bolt. I shall easily catch you," he said, in a harsh and infinitely disagreeable voice.

She stood still; indeed, she could not move yet. He went to the mantelpiece, took the envelope from

the stand, opened it, took out the notes, counted them. Miss Timmins ran a dry tongue along her lips.

"So," he said, and his voice was even harsher. "You'd help that old beast to get the better of me, would you?"

She wanted to protest that she had been driven to it. Indeed, her lips moved, but no sound came from them—she was still in the paralysis of terror.

She looked at his face. It was a little white; there was a hard fierceness on it; his eyes were blazing. But unpleasant, dangerous as he looked, she had never liked him so much: she was the cause of his genuine emotion.

"Damn it! I thought we were friends," he said, and stared at her with disappointed, raging eyes.

"B—B—But I've brought you the t—t—two thousand p—p—pounds," she stammered.

"What the devil's money got to do with it? You know that nothing would induce me to let that old brute have the horse. I thought we were friends."

"B—B—But I am," she protested.

"You a friend? And you help that old brute against me? You're a treacherous little devil!"

"I'm not! I *had* to help him!" she cried.

"*Had* to? You mean he's paying you for it.

She shrank back a little.

"Is he paying you?" he cried.

She saw where she stood, how he must see her. She wrung her hands, staring at him with piteous

eyes, and opened her mouth to speak and could not find the words.

"Is he?" he almost shouted.

"Yes," she said almost with the fierceness of a creature at bay.

"You treacherous little devil!" he snarled.

"I'm not!" she cried.

"You are!" he said violently.

He walked slowly across the room to the telephone which stood on a side-table.

"This is a matter for the police," he said. "I'll ring them up."

"What for? You've got the two thousand pounds," she said in a startled voice.

He turned and looked at her and thrust the notes into the pocket of his pyjama jacket.

"Have I? Where is it?" he said, coolly.

"You never would!" she cried in incredulous accents.

"I *will*," he said in a tone of finality, and she knew that he would.

"But Sir Charles knows I had the two thousand pounds for the horse," she urged.

"Then you should have brought it with you," he said in a faintly jeering tone.

"You can't do such a thing!" she cried, again incredulous.

"Can't I? Look here: we were friends—quite close friends—*more* than friends——"

"I never believed that," she broke in in quick protest.

"Yes, you did; you *knew* it; you knew that I

was," he declared. "And then you go and play this faithless trick on me. Of course I'll send you to prison. It's the proper place for creatures like you."

His face was set hard and cruel and daunting. She shivered. He took up the telephone, then paused and turned slowly towards her.

"After all—I'll give you a choice—why not?" he said slowly. "Will you go to prison or will you stay?"

"Stay?" she said, blankly.

"Here."

"No!" she cried.

"You'd rather go to prison?" he said in an almost careless tone.

"Yes!" she cried.

"Don't be in such a hurry. Think a minute," he said coldly.

He sat down on the edge of the table and gazed at her with, as it seemed, a cold curiosity. She stared at him.

Her mouth was very dry, but she contrived to begin: "You don't understand—"

"I understand perfectly," he interrupted.

"No, no!" she cried "You don't really—"

"I do! You've got your choice!" he said loudly.

They gazed at one another. Her mind was in a whirl. There must be some way out of it. She could not find it.

He rose from the table and said: "Well?"

"I'll go to prison," she cried fiercely.

"All right," he said in an indifferent tone and picked up the telephone and put the receiver to his ear.

"I want the nearest police station," he said.

"No, no, I can't. I couldn't stand it!" cried Miss Timmins and sobbed. "You brute!" She sobbed again. "I'll stay."

CHAPTER XXII

DAWN

THE pale light of the dawn was changing to the warmer light of the rising sun when Miss Timmins came into Lord Scredington's sitting-room. It was brightly lighted, for half of the curtain was still drawn, as she had left it when she came, in order to be able to escape quickly. She paused for a moment and it seemed to her that a thrush, singing in one of the trees in the garden, was making far too much noise. She shivered. Then she went slowly, drooping a little, to the hearth-rug and picked up the bag that held the chalcedony horse. She found it very heavy and hoped that she would find a taxi, or she would be hard put to it to get it to South Street.

She carried it to the window and paused. Then she set it down and crossed the room, very quietly, to Lord Scredington's bedroom and very quietly opened the door a few inches and looked at him. With his tousled hair and the faint smile about his lips, he looked a sleeping boy. It must have been that even in his sleep he felt her eyes on him, for his own opened.

She dashed for the window, caught up the bag,

and slipped through it; but, hampered with that heavy weight, she was a little slow getting on to the fire-escape, and before she was three steps down it, he had gripped her arm.

"Here! Steady on! Stop! Come back!" he said in imperative accents.

Miss Timmins said nothing; she clenched her teeth and struggled to free herself, vainly. He drew her back on to the balcony and across it and pushed her gently through the window into the sitting-room and loosed her and shut the window.

"You oughtn't to have tried to bolt like that, darling," he said gently in reproachful accents.

She set the bag on a chair and rubbed her arm where he had gripped her.

"Did I hurt it? I'm awfully sorry, dear. I didn't mean to. But you're so strong."

He rubbed her arm, and then he kissed her and said: "You can't go off like that, you know."

"Why not? I want to get away. I must get away. As it is, somebody at South Street is nearly certain to see me come in," she said.

She let herself drop wearily into the nearest easy chair and lay back in it.

"There's no hurry," he protested. "No one will be stirring for another hour at least. Goodness, it's chilly! Wait till I get into my dressing-gown and we'll settle up."

He went into his bedroom, took his dressing-gown from behind the door and came back, slipping it on. Before he buttoned it, he drew the bank-notes from the pocket of his pyjama jacket.

"What do you mean by settling up?" she said in some surprise.

"We've got to share the boodle, of course," he replied, holding up the notes.

"What on earth are you talking about?" she said with a bewildered air.

"Uncle Charles's contribution—the profit on the horse," he explained.

"So you're trying to give me money now?" she said wearily.

"Not a bit of it. I'm merely declaring a dividend," he protested.

She looked at him with eyes faintly reproachful and said: "You people are queer. You think you can pay for everything."

"No, I don't," he said quickly.

"Oh, yes, you do," she said with conviction.

"Hang it all! I don't!" he said with some heat.

"What about fifty-fifty—a thousand to you and a thousand to me?"

"No, dear, I'm not a common girl. I don't take money for love," she said quietly.

"There's nothing common about it; the best people do it," he said simply. "Besides, there's no taking money for love about it. This is business. You must have your share of the profit on the horse. It's only fair. If it hadn't been for you, I should probably have sold it to some blighter for a monkey. Take half. It's really only fair."

He held out two of the notes.

"Not a penny," she said, shaking her head.

"But you've got to have it," he protested. "You must see that; it's as plain as a pikestaff."

"Not a penny," she said in a tone of quiet finality.

"But hang it all, dearest!" he said in some excitement. "You're letting me down. You can't do that—not again!"

"Don't bother me, dear. I don't want it," she said wearily.

He looked at her in a frowning perplexity and no little dismay and said: "But this isn't fair to me."

"Oh, yes it is," she said firmly.

"But you don't understand, dearest," he persisted. "Can't you see how it lets me down? You let me down at the beginning by not telling me till it was too late how that infernal old hog forced you to collar the horse for him and——"

"You wouldn't let me tell you. You wouldn't even listen!"

"You should have made me listen," he said.

She smiled a tired little smile and said: "Made you? Did anyone ever make you do anything you didn't want to do, or stop you doing anything you did want to do?"

He hesitated a moment, appearing to reflect, and said: "No—not that I remember."

"Well, what's the good of talking about me making you listen?"

"I'm afraid I was rather abrupt—at least, I'm not—I'm not sorry, I mean. I'm glad you didn't make me listen, and it's no use my pretending I'm not. But after all, that's got nothing to do with this. You can't let me down over this. I can't

allow it. You've got to take your share," and again he held out the notes to her.

"I will *not!*" she cried almost fiercely.

He sat down on the arm of the chair and kissed her and said: "Don't be a little beast, dearest. Do take it."

"No."

He slipped his hand into his pocket and took out the other notes and said: "Then take the lot. Be a little lady and take the lot."

"There! I said you were trying to pay me!" she cried in dolorous accents.

"Nothing of the kind! I'm not!" he protested. "But I can't be in this position; now that I know how things really stood; I feel as if I'd behaved so damned badly."

"But why, dear? I haven't said anything," she said gently.

"That makes it a damn sight worse!" he declared.

"Well, I can't help it," she said wearily.

"But you can. You can take your share of the profit," he urged.

"I'd nothing to do with your getting the profit, and I won't," she said.

"But it isn't fair, dear. You can't go on letting me feel like a damned cad," he pleaded.

"I can't help it," she said with decision.

He rose and cried in despairing accents: "Hang it! There's no doing anything with you! I never knew such a girl!"

"You've known plenty," she said with a touch of her old mischievousness.

"That's it! Be nasty now! You've landed me in a perfectly infernal hole! Pitch into me!" he cried, in a helpless exasperation.

"I'm not pitching into you, dear. But I don't want to be worried," she said gently.

"But I've *got* to worry you. You can see I have!"

"But it isn't any use," she said in a tone of finality.

"Oh, damn!" he cried, and threw the notes on the floor.

Then he went, scowling, to the window and stared out of it.

Miss Timmins yawned and said plaintively: "Aren't you going to let me go?"

He turned and scowled at her and snapped: "Certainly not!"

"But I've got to go sometime," she urged.

"You have *not*!" he snapped.

"But I can't stay here," she said and yawned again.

He came back from the window, still scowling, and stood over her, gazing down at her pale, tired face. She looked like a tired child, charming, pathetic.

He said with a curious stiffness: "Look here! will you marry me?"

"What?" she cried, astonished.

"You heard what I said. I spoke distinctly enough. Will you marry me?" he said impatiently.

"Of course I won't, dear," she said with decision.

"You won't?" he cried in incredulous accents, staring at her.

"Of course not," she said with the same decision.

"Of all the aggravating little angels in the whole wide world! Why not?" he almost shouted.

"If you'd wanted to marry me, you'd have said something about it before now. But you never meant to marry me and you don't really want to. You only want to feel comfortable with yourself," she said with quiet conviction.

"Not a bit of it! I always meant to marry you—always—from the very first moment I set eyes on you," he protested earnestly, and his voice rang true enough, and his eyes were honest.

But she said in a faintly admiring tone: "You *can* tell the tale, dear. You ought to have been in the business."

"Well, of course, one doesn't get married if one can help it," he admitted; and then, even more earnestly: "But I always have wanted to marry you, dear. I have honestly. And you're the only girl in the world I ever have wanted to marry. And I'm going to do it. I have a tremendous feeling that I couldn't get on—really—without you."

She shook her head and said with the same quiet certainty: "No, dear; it would never do."

"Of course it would do!" he cried. "I'll make you tremendously happy."

Again she shook her head: "You'd make me tremendously miserable—always running after other girls because you're not fond enough of me," she said sadly. "No. We'll say good-bye."

"Good-bye? What on earth do you mean? What are you going to do?" he cried.

"Oh, I shall go back to the shop to the old life—

without you," she said sadly. "Somehow I couldn't stand seeing you."

"I'm damned if you shall!"

"But, why not? What does it matter to you? You've had your own way all right. What more do you want?"

"But I can't stand having had my own way, I tell you!" he said furiously. "I can't go about the world feeling an infernal cad!"

"You won't feel like that long," she said with matter-of-fact conviction.

"I shall!"

"No, dear; you won't."

Lord Scredington ground his teeth and keeping them closed, said: "In about ten seconds I shall behave like a perfect gentleman and give you the worst hiding a woman ever got!"

"Do, if it will really do you good," she said in a tone of rather weary indifference.

He took a step towards her, then turned sharply away and again went to the window to get himself in hand. She did not even take the trouble to look round at him. She yawned again and closed her eyes. In about a minute he came back and stood over her, and she opened them.

He said quietly, looking at her with piercing eyes: "Look here: I believe you'd sooner have gone to prison than stayed here, if you hadn't really been willing enough to marry me."

She sat upright with a sudden jerk; he saw a faint fear in her eyes; she said: "Oh, do stop worrying me!"

He said with a quiet stubbornness: "Well, tell me you didn't want to marry me, and I won't say another word."

She tried to meet his eyes and failed; she sank back again in the chair and said nothing.

"There! I knew you did, dear," he said in a tone of immense relief. "And you know that I really and truly want to marry you."

He lifted her out of the chair and held her tightly to him and kissed her again and again.

Then he said: "We're not going to have any more of this nonsense. You're going to marry me, and at once. Last week one of those colonial Johnnies got it through in about six hours. My lawyers ought to be able to manage it in four."

She became wholly limp in his arms and sighed deeply and said: "Well, I can't go on being worried for ever."

"Splendid!" he cried, and kissed her again. "And you do care for me, dear? Tell me you do."

"I do, dear—worse luck."

"Then kiss me."

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him very tenderly. The colour had come back into her cheeks and her eyes were bright again and very blue.

She slipped out of his arms and said: "And now I'll be going."

"You won't!" he said quickly. "You can't go tramping about London at five o'clock in the morning on your wedding-day. Besides, I'm not going to risk letting you out of my sight till we're safely married. I know too much about you."

"But I can't get married in these clothes, dear," she protested.

"We'll go out and buy clothes," he said firmly, and slipped an arm round her and drew her towards the door of the sitting room. "Come on, let's go and make some tea."

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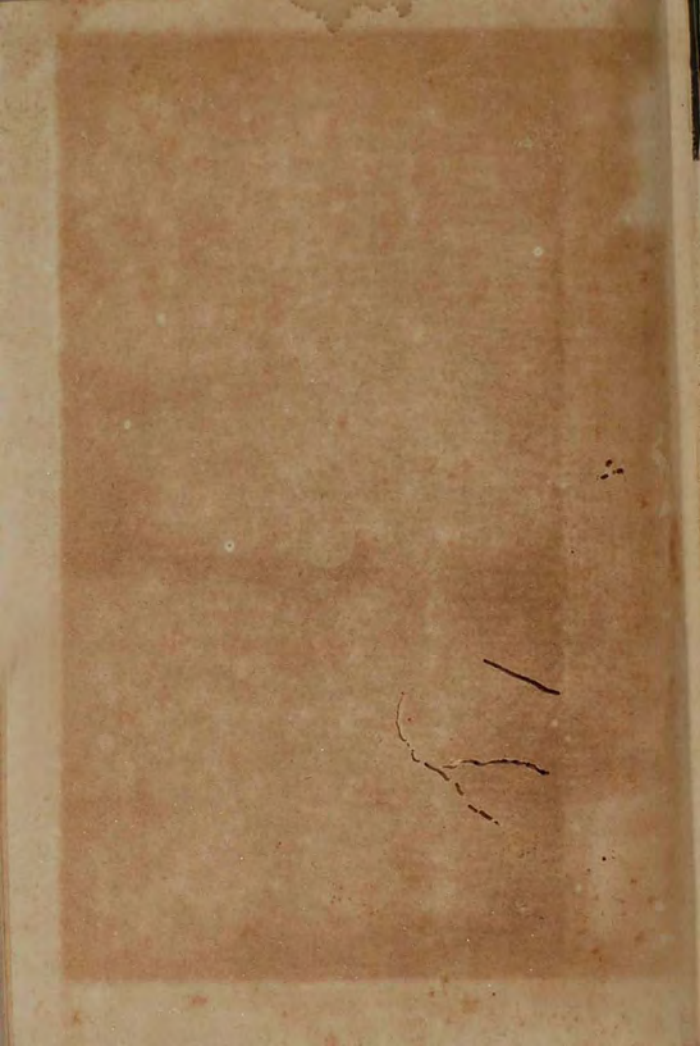
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