

PLAIN JANE

I

LORD PENDRAGON—prince of bankers and banker of princes—paused on the threshold of the door.

“A last word, my dear; remember that you will go in to dinner ahead of all the duchesses.”

He murmured this with a faintly ironical smile. As the door closed behind his portly, ambassadorial form, Jane Timpany laughed, repeating in a whisper:

“Ahead of all the duchesses!”

She glanced about her. In the big, over-decorated drawing-room there was no mirror. In the hall below, in the spacious corridors, mirrors were conspicuously absent. Visitors had noticed this.

“So many beautiful women come to this charming house, Jenny. Your mother and you give them everything of the best, except the pleasure of beholding themselves and their frocks.”

Jane Timpany would reply, coldly:

“I dislike looking-glasses.”

All the Timpanys had been plain people, physically and mentally robust, born and bred money-makers and money-savers. Thomas, Jane's father, had married a woman nearly as rich as himself, out of another cotton-spinning family. During the war Jane lost her two brothers. After the war Thomas Timpany sold his mills, and, having nothing to engross his energies, died.

Plain Jane

Bachelors, eligible and ineligible, had proposed marriage to Jane. To all and sundry she said, curtly, "No."

Finally, upon this eventful afternoon, a semi-royalty, by proxy, had flung his handkerchief at her feet. His Highness, whom Jane had met only twice, was apparently heels over head in love with "*les beaux yeux de sa cassette*." A Minister Plenipotentiary, discretion incarnate, had refused to carry "No" to a Personage!

As a butler and two tall footmen were expediting the departure of his lordship, Jane ascended a marble staircase to her bedroom. Here she surveyed herself dispassionately in a cheval-glass. As she did so, she exclaimed once more:

"Ahead of all the duchesses!"

And then, in a whisper:

"Plain Jane!"

The adjective provoked a smile, and the smile had charm. Humorous lines revealed themselves round a large mouth; two small eyes twinkled. She curtsied to herself:

"Your Highness!"

Presently she went to her mother's room. Mrs. Timpany surveyed her daughter shrewdly.

"Well, Jenny?"

Jane sat down, staring at her mother's whimsical countenance.

"Lord Pendragon says that the Prince wants to marry me. He is coming back for a definite answer in a fortnight's time. If I am to be sold to the highest bidder, mother, I might do worse. I should dominate him; he would not dominate me."

"He might try, my dear."

"I said 'No'; but our banker thinks I shall change my mind. I shan't."

Mrs. Timpany smiled.

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"When St. Peter asks me what I have done, I shall tell him that I brought into the world a sensible girl who refused to peacock about Mayfair as a princess."

Mrs. Timpany spoke with a slight Lancashire burr. Her maternal grandmother had run about Oldham bare-headed, wearing the clogs, the woollen skirt, and the shawl still to be seen in the streets of that industrial centre.

Jane said, incisively :

"My money will make an old maid of me."

"When I was your age, dear, I wanted a man. I've no patience with women who say they don't."

"You were married for yourself, mother."

"Yes—and no better-looking than you are. If you remain an old maid, Jenny, whatever shall we do with our money?"

"I'm not going to be married for my money. That's that."

Mrs. Timpany picked up a letter lying upon her lap.

"You have heard me speak, Jenny, of the Tollerfields?"

"Dozens of times," replied Jane.

"I have had a letter, a begging letter, from William Tollerfield. The Timpanys and the Tollerfields climbed the hill together before I was born. Poor William seems to have tumbled down the hill. Read his letter, dear."

Jane read as follows :

"DEAR MADAM,

I take the liberty, as a friend of your late husband, to ask for financial assistance. We never met, but I married, you may remember, a school-mate of yours, long since dead. Happily, misfortune never touched her. My father made the mistake of educating me as a man of

leisure. The fortune left to me by him is gone. To-day I am a helpless invalid and almost hopeless. A grant in aid from you would sweeten my adversity. I enclose letters from my doctor and from the local clergyman which establish identity.

I remain,

Faithfully yours,

WILLIAM TOLLERFIELD."

Jane stared at the letter. The handwriting was firm. Mrs. Timpany added a few words :

"The doctor says that his patient is in mean lodgings, suffering from arthritis. The parson says that the writer is known to him as William Tollerfield, son of Henry Tollerfield, of Oldham."

"What do you want to do, mother?"

"He was a friend of your father."

"Did father ever help him?"

"I don't know. You're not getting hard, are you, Jenny?"

"We receive so many appeals, mother. We have been let down so often."

"He married, as he says, a girl I knew, a nice girl. There was a son. He doesn't mention the son. Perhaps he is dead, too, killed in the war. We—we ought to do something."

Jane glanced at the letter.

"Mr. Tollerfield writes from Puddiford-on-Sea, near Cronmouth."

"Yes, Jenny. If we slipped down there and investigated this case at first hand——"

"If you like."

"Incog!"

"Mother! What an idea!"

"Our fashionable friends will think we have gone abroad."

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"It would be an adventure, mother. We—we should get away from our money for a few days, shouldn't we?"

"Yes, dear."

Within three days, two ladies, who signed the register as Mrs. and Miss Stroud, took modest rooms at the Ivanhoe Hotel, a select boarding-house on the front at Puddiford-on-Sea.

II

Jane was astounded, and amused, by the startling change in her mother. Mrs. Timpany became almost frisky as Mrs. Stroud, and was accepted by the other boarders as an addition to their circle.

Within twenty-four hours Jane wandered down the street, not facing the front, where William Tollerfield lived in mean lodgings. A dingy window exhibited a sign: *Apartments*. Greatly daring, Jane rang the bell. The mistress of the house opened the door.

"If you have rooms vacant, I should like to see them," said Jane.

"Pray walk in, madam."

Gentility informed harsh tones. Jane leapt to the conclusion that the landlady might have been a lady's maid who had known happier days. She eyed Jane sharply, as she murmured:

"My best rooms are vacant."

Jane inspected two bedrooms and a shabby sitting-room. Then she heard a familiar sound, the clicking of a typewriting machine. Jane looked up, listening, as the landlady explained:

"Typist. Not overworked, neither! Supports his father."

William Tollerfield's letter had not been typewritten. Jane said tentatively:

"Is the father an invalid?"

The landlady, not at all garrulous, nodded, shaking her head dolorously. Jane was meditating another question, when the clicking stopped. An instant later a step was heard upon the stairs.

“ I beg your pardon.”

A man about thirty stood upon the threshold of the sitting-room.

“ I am going out,” he said pleasantly. “ My father will not disturb you unless it is necessary.”

“ Very good, Mr. Tollerfield.”

Jane sat down. She had liked the tones of a voice which had “ supporting ” quality.

“ Unusual name—Tollerfield.”

The landlady, beguiled by Jane’s smile, became more communicative. The fact that Jane was sitting in the best arm-chair suggested business. Up to this moment intuition had told her that her rooms were not quite good enough for this quietly dressed lady. Still—one never knew !

“ It is a shame, I say, that a clever young man should be tied tight to a crippled father. Ought to be on his own. But there ! It’s none of my business. Do you fancy the rooms, madam ? ”

Jane replied evasively :

“ I will speak to my mother about them.”

Terms were discussed. Jane returned to the Ivanhoe Hotel, anticipating maternal objections to any move for the worse. Really all that could be said of the rooms might be included in one sentence : “ They are perfectly clean.”

Mrs. Timpany, looking like an alert robin, became interested in young Mr. Tollerfield.

“ Good stock,” she declared. “ I suppose we ought to find out more before we help.”

“ That is my idea, mother. Are you sure that the father won’t recognize you ? ”

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"We never met, Jenny. I'm ready to go where you want to go."

So they went.

III

Nothing happened for a day or two.

The son, whose name, so Jane discovered, was John, seemed to be of a retiring disposition. Not so the father, who in his youth had pushed himself everywhere. Now he was pushed, like a baby in an immense "pram," by his son—generally along the front for two hours every afternoon. In the morning the continual clicking of the typewriting machine indicated literary labours. The landlady informed Jane that the Tollerfields sent off and received many letters. Jane was not surprised when the landlady whispered to her :

"It's my belief, miss, that the old man is a genteel beggar."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Jane.

On top of this disconcerting affirmation, acquaintance was "scraped" between the Tollerfields and the Strouds. Garrulous old age met over a dish of tea. Mr. William Tollerfield spoke of the far north. Quite incidentally, he mentioned the Timpanys.

"You've heard of the Timpanys?" he asked.

"Who hasn't?"

"Purse-proud snobs, madam."

Jane winced, expecting an explosion from her mother. To her surprise, Mrs. Timpany's sense of humour rose to the occasion.

"Are they?"

"Pinchers, my dear lady. Tom Timpany is dead. The women, mother and daughter, are rolling in money. Between ourselves, I—William Tollerfield, an old friend—applied for a small—er—grant in aid. What happened to my letter?"

“ Tell me.”

“ Waste-paper basket !”

“ Too bad !”

Jane observed mildly :

“ Probably these——”

“ Timpanys.”

“ Yes. These Timpanys, I dare say, receive such appeals by the dozen every day. But if you had a particular claim on them——” Her voice died away, but she glanced at John's impassive face. He answered curtly :

“ My father's claim was the appeal of Misfortune to Fortune.”

Having said this, John's lips closed. His father embroidered the theme ; and as he warmed to his work, Jane recognized in him some of the qualities of Mr. Micawber.

“ To relieve necessity is a privilege accorded by Omnipotence to the rich. Personally, I share Heine's opinion——”

“ Whose ?”

“ Heinrich Heine. A Hun, but he lived in Paris. He said that if you wanted to know what God really thought of millionaires you had only to look at them.”

The Timpanys looked at each other. William Tollerfield continued blandly :

“ My friend Timpany married a plain woman, and their daughter, so I'm told, has a face like a nutmeg-grater.”

Even under this provocation, Mrs. Timpany murmured softly :

“ Handsome is as handsome does.”

“ Just so, madama, just so. I—er—was prepared to regard Jane Timpany as Anadyomene——”

“ Anna—— ?”

“ Venus rising from the sea, my dear lady, lovely and lovable, had she responded to my S.O.S. signal.”

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“ Did you ask Mrs. Timpany to save your soul, Mr. Tollerfield ? ”

Thus Jane—with a tincture of acerbity. John glanced at her sharply.

“ You are sarcastic, Miss Stroud, at the expense of age and infirmity.”

“ No, no. But,” her voice hardened, “ from what your father has just said, I inferred that the rich might save *their* souls if they exercised the privilege of saving the bodies of the poor.”

William Tollerfield chuckled :

“ I couldn't have put that more neatly myself.”

Harmony was restored, although John, with a vehemence which surprised Jane, plunged into an indictment of the rich. When he finished Mrs. Timpany said slyly :

“ According to you, young man, God helps those who help themselves out of other folk's piles.”

Again the infirm William chuckled. A minute later father and son went upstairs.

IV

Alone with her mother, Jane exhibited indignation. Mrs. Timpany laughed at a too serious face.

“ I'm so sorry for them.”

“ You are always surprising, mother.”

“ So your dear father said. I should like to surprise these people.”

“ How ? ”

“ If we sent them a hundred pounds——”

“ Absurd ! ”

“ Would they relieve *our* necessities ? ”

Jane grappled with the issues.

“ What a test ! ”

Mrs. Timpany nodded.

Jane exclaimed :

"How wonderful of you to get fun out of such a situation!"

"I suppose I could whine, Jenny, if I tried hard enough."

"I'd like to see you at it."

"You shall. Really, this is gingering me up. I think plain food agrees with plain people."

They talked with animation for half an hour. Long before that it was agreed that a hundred pounds should be sent to the old friend of Thomas Timpany. A letter was written :

"DEAR SIR,

My daughter and I regret that your letter of the 28th ult. was not answered more promptly. We are satisfied that you have a claim upon us. Kindly acknowledge the enclosed cheque, which we hope will serve to sweeten your sad life.

Faithfully yours,

BERTHA TIMPANY."

As Mrs. Timpany was writing out the cheque, Jane observed reflectively :

"It's a good deal to pay for a bit of fun."

"I like the young man," replied her mother.

v

During the days that passed between the sending of this letter (from London) and its delivery at Puddiford-on-Sea, acquaintance between the Tollerfields and the Strouds ripened into intimacy.

Upon the Tuesday morning the letter arrived. Joyous notes of exclamation were plainly heard in the parlour beneath.

"He's got it," observed Mrs. Timpany.

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“What will he do with it?” demanded Jane.

“We shall be invited to tea.”

They were, and an excellent tea was provided. A cheque may be as rejuvenating as the Voronoff treatment. The infirm William beamed upon his guests, as John handed round the *friandises* sent in by the local confectioner.

“This is a farewell entertainment.”

“We are faring very well, Mr. Tollerfield, but—what do you mean?”

“My son and I are thinking of moving to better lodgings facing the sea.”

“Really? You might do worse than the Ivanhoe. We moved from there here.” Mrs. Timpany sighed: She continued with an unmistakable whine: “Not expensive, you understand, but beyond our diminishing means.”

Jane “played up.”

“Now, mother, this is not the moment to impose our troubles upon Mr. Tollerfield.”

“Troubles?” repeated Mr. Tollerfield. “Well, well, it is a relief sometimes to talk of one’s troubles. A firm faith in Providence has always sustained me. At the same time, crippled as I am, I have fought my troubles. You behold me, madam, bloody but unbowed. Another cup of tea?”

“Thank you. If you would give me, also, *advice*—”

“The fruit of your own experience,” added Jane.

Slightly uneasy, Mr. Tollerfield said briskly:

“Certainly. With—er—pleasure.”

“We may have to move to humbler lodgings. Money due to us has not been paid. Under such circumstances, ought we to apply for help to certain friends? You applied to those——” She glanced at John.

“Timpanys!”

“Yes, yes. And they basketed you.”

For an instant there was silence, a silence significant

to the Timpanys. Jane looked at John. Mrs. Timpany's twinkling brown eyes rested upon the genial William. John's cheeks flushed. By this time Jane had recognized in him the quality of altruism. Of his devotion to an exacting father there could be no question. The rich may be pardoned when they cock a doubtful eyebrow at what appears to be unselfishness. Probably they have reason behind the conviction that most people grind their own axes. Within ten minutes Jane had summed up the infirm William as a "*faux bonhomme*." John, on the other hand, defied a spinster's analysis.

William spoke first.

"We have heard from the Timpanys. My—er—claim upon their consideration has been recognized. In point of fact, a grant in aid came this morning."

Mrs. Timpany said quietly: "How nice! Makes one think better of the world, doesn't it?"

William nodded majestically.

"I take the world as I find it, dear lady!"

"Taking," thought Jane, "is his hobby! What a man!"

John exclaimed explosively: "I regret what I said about the Timpanys. They have been most generous—astoundingly, confoundingly so!"

"How nice!" repeated Mrs. Timpany soothingly. "What you tell me makes it easier for me!"

"For us," added Jane.

The astute William betrayed nervousness; his nose twitched, scenting importunity.

"You mean that you will be emboldened to apply to your friends for some—er—slight assistance. An appeal—discreetly worded—"

He paused. Obviously, out of a rich vocabulary, he was considering phrases.

"I—I have never appealed to—to anybody," murmured Mrs. Timpany.

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William, apparently much moved, exclaimed: "I'm at your service."

Jane, with a side-glance at John, said gratefully: "Oh, Mr. Tollerfield, we—we couldn't accept a grant in aid from you, but how sweet of you to think of it."

William inflated.

"No, no. I appreciate your delicacy, but I—I will word this appeal for you. It will be a mournful pleasure to do so."

"But, I can't think to whom I could apply," said Mrs. Timpany despairingly. "Ten pounds would tide us over a distressing fortnight, but——"

Jane added with dignity, "We have no near relations. Our rich friends—for reasons which we need not go into—would hardly believe that we, mother and I, really wanted ten pounds."

William nodded like the Olympian Jupiter as he suggested, "An overdraft at your bankers'?"

"We have never asked our bankers to allow us an overdraft. It might upset them," faltered Mrs. Timpany.

William cleared his throat and vision.

"You have asked for my advice. I reply, unhesitatingly, *write to the Timpanys.*"

He folded his hands upon an ample paunch.

"I will dictate a letter—here and now. John!"

"Father!"

"Your note-book." As John rose from the tea-table, William, now master of the situation, said incisively: "Ten pounds is a bagatelle. Friends and relations should be kept in—er—*reserve* for more serious exigencies. Ha! An idea! Are you ready, John?"

John, pencil in hand, nodded, but he looked—so Jane thought—ill at ease.

"Take this down, my boy, as a rough draft. One moment!" He closed his eyes, smiling graciously.

"Yes, yes: I have it. You told me, Mrs. Stroud, that

you came from the north country. You mentioned Oldham in the course of conversation. Oldham shall be the keystone of our arch. Now! 'Dear Madam,—You will be surprised that a stranger should venture to address you, to entreat from you sorely needed' help. Nothing, save the fact that your generosity and beneficence are known throughout the Kingdom,'—capital K for Kingdom, John—'justifies me in making this'—I want an adjective—— Yes—I have it—'poignant appeal. Like yourself, I am a widow with one daughter. I was born in Oldham'; underline that John,——”

“Were you born in Oldham, mother?” asked Jane.

“I was born not far from Oldham, Jenny. Does it matter?”

“Not a bit,” replied William. “A touch of local colour. I continue—‘I was born in Oldham. At the moment I am stranded in—er—mean lodgings at Puddiford-on-Sea, where, by a Providential coincidence, I have made the acquaintance of the Tollerfields. Mr. William Tollerfield has spoken to me in confidence of you and of your daughter. What he said cannot, of course, be repeated, but I gleaned’—gleaned is quite good!—‘I gleaned from Mr. Tollerfield that you were one who—’”

Jane finished the sentence.

“Did not hurl such letters as this into the void of the waste-paper basket.”

“Put it down, John.”

John did so.

“We pause for a suitable climax,” said William, once more closing his eyes. “Yes—yes—this will serve. ‘I am expecting within a few days a remittance.’ That is the truth, madam, isn’t it?”

“It is,” murmured Mrs. Timpany.

“But, alas! I may be constrained by necessity to seek humbler lodgings before the remittance reaches me.”

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Will you help me with a loan of ten pounds, which I pledge myself to return? Mr. Tollerfield would, I know, permit me to cite him as a reference and——”

John stood up. He tore from the note-book the sheet of pencillings, crumpled it up, and hurled it into the Tollerfield waste-paper basket.

“Explain yourself,” commanded William.

“That reference to us. It’s too thick. I—I can’t stick it, father. I—I will lend ten pounds gladly to Mrs. Stroud——”

“You?”

Obviously William was astounded that his son should have ten pounds to lend. He was glaring at John. Mrs. Timpany rose, and, with her, Jane. As quickly John hastened to the door and opened it.

“I quite understand,” said Mrs. Timpany.

“So do I!” said Jane.

“But I don’t!” thundered an angry father.

The ladies withdrew.

VI

Safe in the sanctuary of the shabby parlour, Mrs. and Miss Timpany heard voices raised in altercation.

“I am not disappointed in John,” observed Mrs. Timpany. “He takes after his dear mother, a very unselfish woman.”

“We have squandered a hundred pounds, mother.”

“No, Jenny. Our money has been invested. But—don’t ask any bothering questions yet.”

“I hear John’s step on the stairs.”

“Really? How do you know that it is John’s? As you do know, I will leave you to deal with him.”

There was a tap on the door. Mrs. Timpany fled into her bedroom; Jane said “Come in.”

John came in, still flushed of cheek. Jane indicated a

chair. The young man hesitated, glanced at an impassive countenance, and sat down.

“Is it necessary to say anything?” asked Jane calmly.

“Yes. Miss Stroud, I am sure that you are an understanding person, but you can't know all the unhappy facts. Mrs. and Miss Timpany sent my father one hundred pounds.”

“No doubt they could afford to do so.”

“That is not the point.”

“I think I see your point.”

“I'm sure you do. Out of one hundred pounds my father might well have spared ten pounds to—to help you. But I am not here to pass judgment on him. I beg you to accept, as a temporary loan, ten pounds from me. I shall take it as unfriendly of you if you don't!”

Jane said hurriedly, “I will accept that in—in the spirit which offers it.”

John handed her an envelope. Then he said stiffly, “The generosity of the Timpanys, Miss Stroud, has swept some cobwebs out of my mind. You may have regarded me as a Bolshie.”

“Oh, no.”

Her rare smile encouraged him to go on. “I would not have you think ill of my poor father, because, in spite of his infirmities, he remains genial and even gay. That is something, isn't it?”

A pathetic interrogation touched Jane.

“It is—much,” she assented.

“When that cheque arrived this morning, he was the first to suggest that he might engage a man-nurse to relieve me, to—to leave me free to fight for my own hand?”

“How do you propose to do that?”

“I am counting on the Timpanys. They have placed me under obligations. I would serve them faithfully. I am more than a mere typist and stenographer. In

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acknowledging receipt of that cheque, I have placed myself unreservedly at their service. It would be a great honour to work for them."

"You have told your father?"

"Not yet."

"Why have you told me?"

He remained silent, lifting eloquent eyes to hers.

Jane murmured, "This is a proof of friendship?"

"Yes."

Obviously the young man was shy. Jane blushed as he exclaimed:

"I am so glad you are poor, Miss Stroud."

"I don't know how to take that."

"I mean that it makes friendship between us possible. Will you accept me as your friend?"

"Yes," said Jane firmly. "Now tell me in what way you can serve these—Timpanys."

"I'm an expert accountant, Miss Stroud. I had to leave a famous firm of actuaries to look after my father when he was stricken down with inflammatory rheumatism. They would vouch for me. As an accountant, a confidential secretary——"

"Quite," said Jane. "But it is certain that the Timpanys, being women, leave the management of their affairs in competent hands."

"They must be more or less at the mercy of unscrupulous persons. If—if I could save them from being imposed upon."

"That is a brain-wave," said Jane.

John, however, refused to talk further about himself. With pressing insistency he asked many questions indicating sympathetic interests in Mrs. and Miss Stroud. Jane, not being an accomplished liar, told the truth with discreet veilings. She admitted that life had been difficult, a series of compromises.

"We all want—romance."

Each, in turn, defined romance. They parted to meet again in a shelter up on the Marine Parade, not a romantic spot. John read the rough draft of a letter to Mrs. Timpany. Jane said demurely that she thought it would do.

“ You have shown it to your father, Mr. Tollerfield ? ”

“ No, no. He would have insisted on writing it himself.”

“ Probably Mrs. Timpany will suggest a personal interview, if—if she *understands* all that you have left unwritten.”

John perceived that Jane was smiling. Her smile percolated through sensitive tissues. He decided that he had never seen such an all-weather smile. He seized Jane's firm hand and pressed it. Jane blushed for the second time that day, recalling what her mother had said about this young man's mother. Obviously he had inherited much from her.

“ What would you do,” asked Jane irrelevantly, “ if you were rich enough to do what you like ? ”

He replied fervently, “ I should ask you to marry me.”

“ Mr. Tollerfield ! ”

“ I beg your pardon, Miss Stroud, but I cannot disguise my feelings.” He spoke so sorrowfully that Jane's smile came back.

“ Evidently you can't,” she murmured.

John said hastily, “ I have nailed my flag to the mast. You know now how it is with me. Accept me——”

“ *Accept* you ? ”

“ On 'appro.' I may make good. I may not. These blessed Timpanys have saved the situation. I can go back to work. Back of my work you stand. Have I forfeited your friendship ? ”

“ N-n-no.”

“ Fine ! ” He spoke briskly, regarding her with shining eyes. “ We—we carry on, as we were, till——”

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“Till——?”

“Till I get a sign from you.”

She nodded, slightly bewildered. A more sophisticated lover might have accepted that nod as a sign. Jane stood up.

“I will go back to my mother.”

In exciting silence they strolled towards their lodgings.

VII

Invariably punctual, Lord Pendragon presented his august person to Miss Timpany when the time limit imposed by him had expired. He looked portentously bland when the butler told him that Mrs. Timpany and Miss Timpany had returned to Prince's Gate the day before.

Jane received him, looking, so he thought, rejuvenated. As the butler was leaving the drawing-room, she said, disconcertingly: “I am expecting a Mr. Tollerfield, Judkins. He will ask to see my mother. But you can show him up here.”

Judkins withdrew.

Lord Pendragon extended two white plump hands.

“My dear young lady, am I to be the first to congratulate you?”

“Upon what?”

“Upon your engagement to His Serene Highness? He was pleased, let me tell you, at your maidenly hesitation. And so, quite frankly, was I.”

“But I didn't hesitate. I said ‘No.’”

Lord Pendragon shrugged his shoulders.

“I took that ‘No’ as ‘Perhaps.’”

“If I had said ‘Perhaps’——”

“Ah! You smile. All is well.”

He sat down as Jane, still smiling, sank into billowy cushions. He was thinking that this young woman

intended to surrender, but not unconditionally. He noticed that Jane glanced at a magnificent Louis XV clock.

"You came back yesterday. You were expecting me?"

"Yes. It is kind of you, Lord Pendragon, to be so interested in finding me a husband. But—do you really know the right man when you see him?"

The famous banker screwed an eyeglass into his eye. Mellifluously, he stated that such knowledge was his inalienable possession.

"You know men," admitted Jane, "but do you know women?"

Wisely, Lord Pendragon hesitated. Jane went on: "Pomps and vanities have never appealed to me. My father's money is a terrible responsibility."

"A husband would relieve you, my dear, of that responsibility."

As he spoke Jane's eyes wandered once more to the clock.

"I am expecting a young man at four. He has applied for the post of confidential secretary. As my father's friend, as our friend and banker, is it too much to ask you to see him?"

Lord Pendragon assured Jane that it would be a privilege.

"I shall leave you before he comes. I shall be in the next room. I want you to talk to him. I want your honest opinion of him as a man. He has worked for a well-known firm of actuaries, and I—mother and I—thought that he might deal honestly and faithfully with all the appeals that are made to us. Your opinion of him would carry weight with us."

"Delighted to help your mother and you."

"You will see him first?"

"Certainly."

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“ If—if he satisfies you that he can relieve us of these ever-increasing responsibilities, you can tell me so, and then I will see him.”

“ You are a very sensible young woman.”

“ Thank you. He has just come.”

Jane escaped as Judkins threw open the door and announced majestically : “ Mr. Tollerfield, my lord.”

VIII

Within ten minutes Lord Pendragon delivered to Mrs. and Miss Timpany a considered verdict. He spoke with lowered tone of voice, inasmuch as Mr. Tollerfield was in the next room.

“ I am satisfied with this young man. His credentials, apart from those he carries in his pocket, are printed in indelible ink upon a singularly prepossessing face. I say emphatically—‘ Accept his services.’ ”

“ You think him incapable of betraying a trust ? ”

“ I do. And I am seldom mistaken in my judgments of men.”

Mrs. Timpany observed with dignity : “ I knew his mother. She was my friend.”

“ I will see Mr. Tollerfield,” said Jane slowly. “ Whilst I am seeing him, my mother will explain to you why I shall never go in to dinner ahead of the duchesses.”

IX

When the astounded John beheld Jane his quick wits for the moment failed him. It did not occur to him that Jane was Miss Timpany. He said gaspingly :

“ You ? *Here* ? ”

He admitted afterwards that his first overwhelming conviction was that his humble friend had pulled Fortune’s strings.

"Yes," replied Jane, softly. "I am here. Lord Pendragon is with Mrs. Timpany. You appear to have satisfied him. All that you wanted appears to be yours."

"All?" asked John eagerly.

"Perhaps—more than you bargained for."

But the sign had been given and accepted as such. Jane found herself in a lover's arms. Presently he said wonderingly: "By some extraordinary coincidence, you are, of course, Mrs. Timpany's companion?"

"Oh, dear, I—I thought you had guessed!"

He glanced from her face to her frock.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed vehemently, as illumination descended on him.

She smiled at him reassuringly.

"My man must never say that."