

CHAPTER XII. A FRIEND IN NEED

FRIDAY and Saturday passed uneventfully. Tuppence had received a brief answer to her appeal from Mr. Carter. In it he pointed out that the Young Adventurers had undertaken the work at their own risk, and had been fully warned of the dangers. If anything had happened to Tommy he regretted it deeply, but he could do nothing.

This was cold comfort. Somehow, without Tommy, all the savour went out of the adventure, and, for the first time, Tuppence felt doubtful of success. While they had been together she had never questioned it for a minute. Although she was accustomed to take the lead, and to pride herself on her quick-wittedness, in reality she had relied upon Tommy more than she realized at the time. There was something so eminently sober and clear-headed about him, his common sense and soundness of vision were so unvarying, that without him Tuppence felt much like a rudderless ship. It was curious that Julius, who was undoubtedly much cleverer than Tommy, did not give her the same feeling of support. She had accused Tommy of being a pessimist, and it is certain that he always saw the disadvantages and difficulties which she herself was optimistically given to overlooking, but nevertheless she had really relied a good deal on his judgment. He might be slow, but he was very sure.

It seemed to the girl that, for the first time, she realized the sinister character of the mission they had undertaken so lightheartedly. It had begun like a page of romance. Now, shorn of its glamour, it seemed to be turning to grim reality. Tommy--that was all that mattered. Many times in the day Tuppence blinked the tears out of her eyes resolutely. "Little fool," she would apostrophize herself, "don't snivel. Of course you're fond of him. You've known him all your life. But there's no need to be sentimental about it."

In the meantime, nothing more was seen of Boris. He did not come to the flat, and Julius and the car waited in vain. Tuppence gave herself over to new meditations. Whilst admitting the truth of Julius's objections, she had nevertheless not entirely relinquished the idea of appealing to Sir James Peel Edgerton. Indeed, she had gone so far as to look up his address in the Red Book. Had he meant to warn her that day? If so, why? Surely she was at least entitled to demand an explanation. He had looked at her so kindly. Perhaps he might tell them something concerning Mrs. Vandemeyer which might lead to a clue to Tommy's whereabouts.

Anyway, Tuppence decided, with her usual shake of the shoulders, it was worth trying, and try it she would. Sunday was her afternoon out. She would meet Julius, persuade him to her point of view, and they would beard the lion in his den.

When the day arrived Julius needed a considerable amount of persuading, but Tuppence held firm. "It can do no harm," was what she always came back to. In the end Julius gave in, and they proceeded in the car to Carlton House Terrace.

The door was opened by an irreproachable butler. Tuppence felt a little nervous. After all, perhaps it WAS colossal cheek on her part. She had decided not to ask if Sir James was "at home," but to adopt a more personal attitude.

"Will you ask Sir James if I can see him for a few minutes? I have an important message for him."

The butler retired, returning a moment or two later.

"Sir James will see you. Will you step this way?"

He ushered them into a room at the back of the house, furnished as a library. The collection of books was a magnificent one, and Tuppence noticed that all one wall was devoted to works on crime and criminology. There were several deep-padded leather arm-chairs, and an old-fashioned open hearth. In the window was a big roll-top desk strewn with papers at which the master of the house was sitting.

He rose as they entered.

"You have a message for me? Ah"--he recognized Tuppence with a smile--"it's you, is it? Brought a message from Mrs. Vandemeyer, I suppose?"

"Not exactly," said Tuppence. "In fact, I'm afraid I only said that to be quite sure of getting in. Oh, by the way, this is Mr. Hersheimer, Sir James Peel Edgerton."

"Pleased to meet you," said the American, shooting out a hand.

"Won't you both sit down?" asked Sir James. He drew forward two chairs.

"Sir James," said Tuppence, plunging boldly, "I dare say you will think it is most awful cheek of me coming here like this. Because, of course, it's nothing whatever to do with you, and then you're a very important person, and of course Tommy

and I are very unimportant." She paused for breath.

"Tommy?" queried Sir James, looking across at the American.

"No, that's Julius," explained Tuppence. "I'm rather nervous, and that makes me tell it badly. What I really want to know is what you meant by what you said to me the other day? Did you mean to warn me against Mrs. Vandemeyer? You did, didn't you?"

"My dear young lady, as far as I recollect I only mentioned that there were equally good situations to be obtained elsewhere."

"Yes, I know. But it was a hint, wasn't it?"

"Well, perhaps it was," admitted Sir James gravely.

"Well, I want to know more. I want to know just WHY you gave me a hint."

Sir James smiled at her earnestness.

"Suppose the lady brings a libel action against me for defamation of character?"

"Of course," said Tuppence. "I know lawyers are always dreadfully careful. But can't we say 'without prejudice' first, and then say just what we want to."

"Well," said Sir James, still smiling, "without prejudice, then, if I had a young sister forced to earn her living, I should not like to see her in Mrs. Vandemeyer's service. I felt it incumbent on me just to give you a hint. It is no place for a young and inexperienced girl. That is all I can tell you."

"I see," said Tuppence thoughtfully. "Thank you very much. But I'm not REALLY inexperienced, you know. I knew perfectly that she was a bad lot when I went there--as a matter of fact that's WHY I went----" She broke off, seeing some bewilderment on the lawyer's face, and went on: "I think perhaps I'd better tell you the whole story, Sir James. I've a sort of feeling that you'd know in a minute if I didn't tell the truth, and so you might as well know all about it from the beginning. What do you think, Julius?"

"As you're bent on it, I'd go right ahead with the facts," replied the American, who had so far sat in silence.

"Yes, tell me all about it," said Sir James. "I want to know who Tommy is."

Thus encouraged Tuppence plunged into her tale, and the lawyer listened with close attention.

"Very interesting," he said, when she finished. "A great deal of what you tell me, child, is already known to me. I've had certain theories of my own about this Jane Finn. You've done extraordinarily well so far, but it's rather too bad of--what do you know him as?--Mr. Carter to pitchfork you two young things into an affair of this kind. By the way, where did Mr. Hersheimer come in originally? You didn't make that clear?"

Julius answered for himself.

"I'm Jane's first cousin," he explained, returning the lawyer's keen gaze.

"Ah!"

"Oh, Sir James," broke out Tuppence, "what do you think has become of Tommy?"

"H'm." The lawyer rose, and paced slowly up and down. "When you arrived, young lady, I was just packing up my traps. Going to Scotland by the night train for a few days' fishing. But there are different kinds of fishing. I've a good mind to stay, and see if we can't get on the track of that young chap."

"Oh!" Tuppence clasped her hands ecstatically.

"All the same, as I said before, it's too bad of--of Carter to set you two babies on a job like this. Now, don't get offended, Miss--er----"

"Cowley. Prudence Cowley. But my friends call me Tuppence."

"Well, Miss Tuppence, then, as I'm certainly going to be a friend. Don't be offended because I think you're young. Youth is a failing only too easily outgrown. Now, about this young Tommy of yours----"

"Yes." Tuppence clasped her hands.

"Frankly, things look bad for him. He's been butting in somewhere where he wasn't wanted. Not a doubt of it. But don't give up hope."

"And you really will help us? There, Julius! He didn't want me to come," she

added by way of explanation.

"H'm," said the lawyer, favouring Julius with another keen glance. "And why was that?"

"I reckoned it would be no good worrying you with a petty little business like this."

"I see." He paused a moment. "This petty little business, as you call it, bears directly on a very big business, bigger perhaps than either you or Miss Tuppence know. If this boy is alive, he may have very valuable information to give us. Therefore, we must find him."

"Yes, but how?" cried Tuppence. "I've tried to think of everything."

Sir James smiled.

"And yet there's one person quite near at hand who in all probability knows where he is, or at all events where he is likely to be."

"Who is that?" asked Tuppence, puzzled.

"Mrs. Vandemeyer."

"Yes, but she'd never tell us."

"Ah, that is where I come in. I think it quite likely that I shall be able to make Mrs. Vandemeyer tell me what I want to know."

"How?" demanded Tuppence, opening her eyes very wide.

"Oh, just by asking her questions," replied Sir James easily. "That's the way we do it, you know."

He tapped with his finger on the table, and Tuppence felt again the intense power that radiated from the man.

"And if she won't tell?" asked Julius suddenly.

"I think she will. I have one or two powerful levers. Still, in that unlikely event, there is always the possibility of bribery."

"Sure. And that's where I come in!" cried Julius, bringing his fist down on the table with a bang. "You can count on me, if necessary, for one million dollars. Yes, sir, one million dollars!"

Sir James sat down and subjected Julius to a long scrutiny.

"Mr. Hersheimer," he said at last, "that is a very large sum."

"I guess it'll have to be. These aren't the kind of folk to offer sixpence to."

"At the present rate of exchange it amounts to considerably over two hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

"That's so. Maybe you think I'm talking through my hat, but I can deliver the goods all right, with enough over to spare for your fee."

Sir James flushed slightly.

"There is no question of a fee, Mr. Hersheimer. I am not a private detective."

"Sorry. I guess I was just a mite hasty, but I've been feeling bad about this money question. I wanted to offer a big reward for news of Jane some days ago, but your crusted institution of Scotland Yard advised me against it. Said it was undesirable."

"They were probably right," said Sir James dryly.

"But it's all O.K. about Julius," put in Tuppence. "He's not pulling your leg. He's got simply pots of money."

"The old man piled it up in style," explained Julius. "Now, let's get down to it. What's your idea?"

Sir James considered for a moment or two.

"There is no time to be lost. The sooner we strike the better." He turned to Tuppence. "Is Mrs. Vandemeyer dining out to-night, do you know?"

"Yes, I think so, but she will not be out late. Otherwise, she would have taken the latchkey."

"Good. I will call upon her about ten o'clock. What time are you supposed to

return?"

"About nine-thirty or ten, but I could go back earlier."

"You must not do that on any account. It might arouse suspicion if you did not stay out till the usual time. Be back by nine-thirty. I will arrive at ten. Mr. Hersheimer will wait below in a taxi perhaps."

"He's got a new Rolls-Royce car," said Tuppence with vicarious pride.

"Even better. If I succeed in obtaining the address from her, we can go there at once, taking Mrs. Vandemeyer with us if necessary. You understand?"

"Yes." Tuppence rose to her feet with a skip of delight. "Oh, I feel so much better!"

"Don't build on it too much, Miss Tuppence. Go easy."

Julius turned to the lawyer.

"Say, then. I'll call for you in the car round about nine-thirty. Is that right?"

"Perhaps that will be the best plan. It would be unnecessary to have two cars waiting about. Now, Miss Tuppence, my advice to you is to go and have a good dinner, a REALLY good one, mind. And don't think ahead more than you can help."

He shook hands with them both, and a moment later they were outside.

"Isn't he a duck?" inquired Tuppence ecstatically, as she skipped down the steps. "Oh, Julius, isn't he just a duck?"

"Well, I allow he seems to be the goods all right. And I was wrong about its being useless to go to him. Say, shall we go right away back to the Ritz?"

"I must walk a bit, I think. I feel so excited. Drop me in the park, will you? Unless you'd like to come too?"

"I want to get some petrol," he explained. "And send off a cable or two."

"All right. I'll meet you at the Ritz at seven. We'll have to dine upstairs. I can't show myself in these glad rags."

"Sure. I'll get Felix help me choose the menu. He's some head waiter, that. So long."

Tuppence walked briskly along towards the Serpentine, first glancing at her watch. It was nearly six o'clock. She remembered that she had had no tea, but felt too excited to be conscious of hunger. She walked as far as Kensington Gardens and then slowly retraced her steps, feeling infinitely better for the fresh air and exercise. It was not so easy to follow Sir James's advice, and put the possible events of the evening out of her head. As she drew nearer and nearer to Hyde Park corner, the temptation to return to South Audley Mansions was almost irresistible.

At any rate, she decided, it would do no harm just to go and LOOK at the building. Perhaps, then, she could resign herself to waiting patiently for ten o'clock.

South Audley Mansions looked exactly the same as usual. What Tuppence had expected she hardly knew, but the sight of its red brick stolidity slightly assuaged the growing and entirely unreasonable uneasiness that possessed her. She was just turning away when she heard a piercing whistle, and the faithful Albert came running from the building to join her.

Tuppence frowned. It was no part of the programme to have attention called to her presence in the neighbourhood, but Albert was purple with suppressed excitement.

"I say, miss, she's a-going!"

"Who's going?" demanded Tuppence sharply.

"The crook. Ready Rita. Mrs. Vandemeyer. She's a-packing up, and she's just sent down word for me to get her a taxi."

"What?" Tuppence clutched his arm.

"It's the truth, miss. I thought maybe as you didn't know about it."

"Albert," cried Tuppence, "you're a brick. If it hadn't been for you we'd have lost her."

Albert flushed with pleasure at this tribute.

"There's no time to lose," said Tuppence, crossing the road. "I've got to stop her. At all costs I must keep her here until----" She broke off. "Albert, there's a telephone here, isn't there?"

The boy shook his head.

"The flats mostly have their own, miss. But there's a box just round the corner."

"Go to it then, at once, and ring up the Ritz Hotel. Ask for Mr. Hersheimer, and when you get him tell him to get Sir James and come on at once, as Mrs. Vandemeyer is trying to hook it. If you can't get him, ring up Sir James Peel Edgerton, you'll find his number in the book, and tell him what's happening. You won't forget the names, will you?"

Albert repeated them glibly. "You trust to me, miss, it'll be all right. But what about you? Aren't you afraid to trust yourself with her?"

"No, no, that's all right. BUT GO AND TELEPHONE. Be quick."

Drawing a long breath, Tuppence entered the Mansions and ran up to the door of No. 20. How she was to detain Mrs. Vandemeyer until the two men arrived, she did not know, but somehow or other it had to be done, and she must accomplish the task single-handed. What had occasioned this precipitate departure? Did Mrs. Vandemeyer suspect her?

Speculations were idle. Tuppence pressed the bell firmly. She might learn something from the cook.

Nothing happened and, after waiting some minutes, Tuppence pressed the bell again, keeping her finger on the button for some little while. At last she heard footsteps inside, and a moment later Mrs. Vandemeyer herself opened the door. She lifted her eyebrows at the sight of the girl.

"You?"

"I had a touch of toothache, ma'am," said Tuppence glibly. "So thought it better to come home and have a quiet evening."

Mrs. Vandemeyer said nothing, but she drew back and let Tuppence pass into the hall.

"How unfortunate for you," she said coldly. "You had better go to bed."

"Oh, I shall be all right in the kitchen, ma'am. Cook will----"

"Cook is out," said Mrs. Vandemeyer, in a rather disagreeable tone. "I sent her out. So you see you had better go to bed."

Suddenly Tuppence felt afraid. There was a ring in Mrs. Vandemeyer's voice that she did not like at all. Also, the other woman was slowly edging her up the passage. Tuppence turned at bay.

"I don't want----"

Then, in a flash, a rim of cold steel touched her temple, and Mrs. Vandemeyer's voice rose cold and menacing:

"You damned little fool! Do you think I don't know? No, don't answer. If you struggle or cry out, I'll shoot you like a dog."

The rim of steel pressed a little harder against the girl's temple.

"Now then, march," went on Mrs. Vandemeyer. "This way--into my room. In a minute, when I've done with you, you'll go to bed as I told you to. And you'll sleep--oh yes, my little spy, you'll sleep all right!"

There was a sort of hideous geniality in the last words which Tuppence did not at all like. For the moment there was nothing to be done, and she walked obediently into Mrs. Vandemeyer's bedroom. The pistol never left her forehead. The room was in a state of wild disorder, clothes were flung about right and left, a suit-case and a hat box, half-packed, stood in the middle of the floor.

Tuppence pulled herself together with an effort. Her voice shook a little, but she spoke out bravely.

"Come now," she said. "This is nonsense. You can't shoot me. Why, every one in the building would hear the report."

"I'd risk that," said Mrs. Vandemeyer cheerfully. "But, as long as you don't sing out for help, you're all right--and I don't think you will. You're a clever girl. You deceived ME all right. I hadn't a suspicion of you! So I've no doubt that you understand perfectly well that this is where I'm on top and you're underneath. Now then--sit on the bed. Put your hands above your head, and if you value your life don't move them."

Tuppence obeyed passively. Her good sense told her that there was nothing else to do but accept the situation. If she shrieked for help there was very little chance of anyone hearing her, whereas there was probably quite a good chance of Mrs. Vandemeyer's shooting her. In the meantime, every minute of delay gained was valuable.

Mrs. Vandemeyer laid down the revolver on the edge of the washstand within reach of her hand, and, still eyeing Tuppence like a lynx in case the girl should attempt to move, she took a little stoppered bottle from its place on the marble and poured some of its contents into a glass which she filled up with water.

"What's that?" asked Tuppence sharply.

"Something to make you sleep soundly."

Tuppence paled a little.

"Are you going to poison me?" she asked in a whisper.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Vandemeyer, smiling agreeably.

"Then I shan't drink it," said Tuppence firmly. "I'd much rather be shot. At any rate that would make a row, and some one might hear it. But I won't be killed off quietly like a lamb."

Mrs. Vandemeyer stamped her foot.

"Don't be a little fool! Do you really think I want a hue and cry for murder out after me? If you've any sense at all, you'll realize that poisoning you wouldn't suit my book at all. It's a sleeping draught, that's all. You'll wake up to-morrow morning none the worse. I simply don't want the bother of tying you up and gagging you. That's the alternative--and you won't like it, I can tell you! I can be very rough if I choose. So drink this down like a good girl, and you'll be none the worse for it."

In her heart of hearts Tuppence believed her. The arguments she had adduced rang true. It was a simple and effective method of getting her out of the way for the time being. Nevertheless, the girl did not take kindly to the idea of being tamely put to sleep without as much as one bid for freedom. She felt that once Mrs. Vandemeyer gave them the slip, the last hope of finding Tommy would be gone.

Tuppence was quick in her mental processes. All these reflections passed through her mind in a flash, and she saw where a chance, a very problematical chance, lay, and she determined to risk all in one supreme effort.

Accordingly, she lurched suddenly off the bed and fell on her knees before Mrs. Vandemeyer, clutching her skirts frantically.

"I don't believe it," she moaned. "It's poison--I know it's poison. Oh, don't make me drink it"--her voice rose to a shriek--"don't make me drink it!"

Mrs. Vandemeyer, glass in hand, looked down with a curling lip at this sudden collapse.

"Get up, you little idiot! Don't go on drivelling there. How you ever had the nerve to play your part as you did I can't think." She stamped her foot. "Get up, I say."

But Tuppence continued to cling and sob, interjecting her sobs with incoherent appeals for mercy. Every minute gained was to the good. Moreover, as she grovelled, she moved imperceptibly nearer to her objective.

Mrs. Vandemeyer gave a sharp impatient exclamation, and jerked the girl to her knees.

"Drink it at once!" Imperiously she pressed the glass to the girl's lips.

Tuppence gave one last despairing moan.

"You swear it won't hurt me?" she temporized.

"Of course it won't hurt you. Don't be a fool."

"Will you swear it?"

"Yes, yes," said the other impatiently. "I swear it."

Tuppence raised a trembling left hand to the glass.

"Very well." Her mouth opened meekly.

Mrs. Vandemeyer gave a sigh of relief, off her guard for the moment. Then, quick as a flash, Tuppence jerked the glass upward as hard as she could. The fluid in it

splashed into Mrs. Vandemeyer's face, and during her momentary gasp, Tuppence's right hand shot out and grasped the revolver where it lay on the edge of the washstand. The next moment she had sprung back a pace, and the revolver pointed straight at Mrs. Vandemeyer's heart, with no unsteadiness in the hand that held it.

In the moment of victory, Tuppence betrayed a somewhat unsportsmanlike triumph.

"Now who's on top and who's underneath?" she crowed.

The other's face was convulsed with rage. For a minute Tuppence thought she was going to spring upon her, which would have placed the girl in an unpleasant dilemma, since she meant to draw the line at actually letting off the revolver. However, with an effort Mrs. Vandemeyer controlled herself, and at last a slow evil smile crept over her face.

"Not a fool, then, after all! You did that well, girl. But you shall pay for it--oh, yes, you shall pay for it! I have a long memory!"

"I'm surprised you should have been gulped so easily," said Tuppence scornfully. "Did you really think I was the kind of girl to roll about on the floor and whine for mercy?"

"You may do--some day!" said the other significantly.

The cold malignity of her manner sent an unpleasant chill down Tuppence's spine, but she was not going to give in to it.

"Supposing we sit down," she said pleasantly. "Our present attitude is a little melodramatic. No--not on the bed. Draw a chair up to the table, that's right. Now I'll sit opposite you with the revolver in front of me--just in case of accidents. Splendid. Now, let's talk."

"What about?" said Mrs. Vandemeyer sullenly.

Tuppence eyed her thoughtfully for a minute. She was remembering several things. Boris's words, "I believe you would sell--us!" and her answer, "The price would have to be enormous," given lightly, it was true, yet might not there be a substratum of truth in it? Long ago, had not Whittington asked: "Who's been blabbing? Rita?" Would Rita Vandemeyer prove to be the weak spot in the armour of Mr. Brown?

Keeping her eyes fixed steadily on the other's face, Tuppence replied quietly:

"Money----"

Mrs. Vandemeyer started. Clearly, the reply was unexpected.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. You said just now that you had a long memory. A long memory isn't half as useful as a long purse! I dare say it relieves your feelings a good deal to plan out all sorts of dreadful things to do to me, but is that PRACTICAL? Revenge is very unsatisfactory. Every one always says so. But money"--Tuppence warmed to her pet creed--"well, there's nothing unsatisfactory about money, is there?"

"Do you think," said Mrs. Vandemeyer scornfully, "that I am the kind of woman to sell my friends?"

"Yes," said Tuppence promptly. "If the price was big enough."

"A paltry hundred pounds or so!"

"No," said Tuppence. "I should suggest--a hundred thousand!"

Her economical spirit did not permit her to mention the whole million dollars suggested by Julius.

A flush crept over Mrs. Vandemeyer's face.

"What did you say?" she asked, her fingers playing nervously with a brooch on her breast. In that moment Tuppence knew that the fish was hooked, and for the first time she felt a horror of her own money-loving spirit. It gave her a dreadful sense of kinship to the woman fronting her.

"A hundred thousand pounds," repeated Tuppence.

The light died out of Mrs. Vandemeyer's eyes. She leaned back in her chair.

"Bah!" she said. "You haven't got it."

"No," admitted Tuppence, "I haven't--but I know some one who has."

"Who?"

"A friend of mine."

"Must be a millionaire," remarked Mrs. Vandemeyer unbelievably.

"As a matter of fact he is. He's an American. He'll pay you that without a murmur. You can take it from me that it's a perfectly genuine proposition."

Mrs. Vandemeyer sat up again.

"I'm inclined to believe you," she said slowly.

There was silence between them for some time, then Mrs. Vandemeyer looked up.

"What does he want to know, this friend of yours?"

Tuppence went through a momentary struggle, but it was Julius's money, and his interests must come first.

"He wants to know where Jane Finn is," she said boldly.

Mrs. Vandemeyer showed no surprise.

"I'm not sure where she is at the present moment," she replied.

"But you could find out?"

"Oh, yes," returned Mrs. Vandemeyer carelessly. "There would be no difficulty about that."

"Then"--Tuppence's voice shook a little--"there's a boy, a friend of mine. I'm afraid something's happened to him, through your pal Boris."

"What's his name?"

"Tommy Beresford."

"Never heard of him. But I'll ask Boris. He'll tell me anything he knows."

"Thank you." Tuppence felt a terrific rise in her spirits. It impelled her to more audacious efforts. "There's one thing more."

"Well?"

Tuppence leaned forward and lowered her voice.

"WHO IS MR. BROWN?"

Her quick eyes saw the sudden paling of the beautiful face. With an effort Mrs. Vandemeyer pulled herself together and tried to resume her former manner. But the attempt was a mere parody.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You can't have learnt much about us if you don't know that NOBODY KNOWS WHO MR. BROWN IS...."

"You do," said Tuppence quietly.

Again the colour deserted the other's face.

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't know," said the girl truthfully. "But I'm sure."

Mrs. Vandemeyer stared in front of her for a long time.

"Yes," she said hoarsely, at last, "I know. I was beautiful, you see--very beautiful--"

"You are still," said Tuppence with admiration.

Mrs. Vandemeyer shook her head. There was a strange gleam in her electric-blue eyes.

"Not beautiful enough," she said in a soft dangerous voice. "Not--beautiful--enough! And sometimes, lately, I've been afraid.... It's dangerous to know too much!" She leaned forward across the table. "Swear that my name shan't be brought into it--that no one shall ever know."

"I swear it. And, once's he caught, you'll be out of danger."

A terrified look swept across Mrs. Vandemeyer's face.

"Shall I? Shall I ever be?" She clutched Tuppence's arm. "You're sure about the money?"

"Quite sure."

"When shall I have it? There must be no delay."

"This friend of mine will be here presently. He may have to send cables, or something like that. But there won't be any delay--he's a terrific hustler."

A resolute look settled on Mrs. Vandemeyer's face.

"I'll do it. It's a great sum of money, and besides"--she gave a curious smile--"it is not--wise to throw over a woman like me!"

For a moment or two, she remained smiling, and lightly tapping her fingers on the table. Suddenly she started, and her face blanched.

"What was that?"

"I heard nothing."

Mrs. Vandemeyer gazed round her fearfully.

"If there should be some one listening----"

"Nonsense. Who could there be?"

"Even the walls might have ears," whispered the other. "I tell you I'm frightened. You don't know him!"

"Think of the hundred thousand pounds," said Tuppence soothingly.

Mrs. Vandemeyer passed her tongue over her dried lips.

"You don't know him," she reiterated hoarsely. "He's--ah!"

With a shriek of terror she sprang to her feet. Her outstretched hand pointed over Tuppence's head. Then she swayed to the ground in a dead faint.

Tuppence looked round to see what had startled her.

In the doorway were Sir James Peel Edgerton and Julius Hersheimer.