

## CHAPTER II

### THE AUCTION ROOM

I do not think that this conversion about the Pongo savages who were said to worship a Gorilla and a Golden Flower was renewed until we reached my house at Durban. Thither of course I took Mr. Charles Scroope, and thither also came Brother John who, as bedroom accommodation was lacking, pitched his tent in the garden.

One night we sat on the step smoking; Brother John's only concession to human weakness was that he smoked. He drank no wine or spirits; he never ate meat unless he was obliged, but I rejoice to say that he smoked cigars, like most Americans, when he could get them.

"John," said I, "I have been thinking over that yarn of yours and have come to one or two conclusions."

"What may they be, Allan?"

"The first is that you were a great donkey not to get more out of the Kalubi when you had the chance."

"Agreed, Allan, but, amongst other things, I am a doctor and the operation was uppermost in my mind."

"The second is that I believe this Kalubi had charge of the gorilla-god, as no doubt you've guessed; also that it was the gorilla which bit off his finger."

"Why so?"

"Because I have heard of great monkeys called sokos that live in Central East Africa which are said to bite off men's toes and fingers. I have heard too that they are very like gorillas."

"Now you mention it, so have I, Allan. Indeed, once I saw a soko, though some way off, a huge, brown ape which stood on its hind legs and drummed upon its chest with its fists. I didn't see it for long because I ran away."

"The third is that this yellow orchid would be worth a great deal of money if one could dig it up and take it to England."

"I think I told you, Allan, that I valued it at £20,000, so that conclusion of yours is not original."

"The fourth is that I should like to dig up that orchid and get a share of the £20,000."

Brother John became intensely interested.

"Ah!" he said, "now we are getting to the point. I have been wondering how long it would take you to see it, Allan, but if you are slow, you are sure."

"The fifth is," I went on, "that such an expedition to succeed would need a great deal of money, more than you or I could find. Partners would be wanted, active or sleeping, but partners with cash."

Brother John looked towards the window of the room in which Charlie Scroope was in bed, for being still weak he went to rest early.

"No," I said, "he's had enough of Africa, and you told me yourself that it will be two years before he is really strong again. Also there's a lady in this case. Now listen. I have taken it on myself to write to that lady, whose address I found out while he didn't know what he was saying. I have said that he was dying, but that I hoped he might live. Meanwhile, I added, I thought she would like to know that he did nothing but rave of her; also that he was a hero, with a big H twice underlined. My word! I did lay it on about the hero business with a spoon, a real hotel gravy spoon. If Charlie Scroope knows himself again when he sees my description of him, well, I'm a Dutchman, that's all. The letter caught the last mail and will, I hope, reach the lady in due course. Now listen again. Scroope wants me to go to England with him to look after him on the voyage--that's what he says. What he means is that he hopes I might put in a word for him with the lady, if I should chance to be introduced to her. He offers to pay all my expenses and to give me

something for my loss of time. So, as I haven't seen England since I was three years old, I think I'll take the chance."

Brother John's face fell. "Then how about the expedition, Allan?" he asked.

"This is the first of November," I answered, "and the wet season in those parts begins about now and lasts till April. So it would be no use trying to visit your Pongo friends till then, which gives me plenty of time to go to England and come out again. If you'll trust that flower to me I'll take it with me. Perhaps I might be able to find someone who would be willing to put down money on the chance of getting the plant on which it grew. Meanwhile, you are welcome to this house if you care to stay here."

"Thank you, Allan, but I can't sit still for so many months. I'll go somewhere and come back." He paused and a dreamy look came into his dark eyes, then went on, "You see, Brother, it is laid on me to wander and wander through all this great land until--I know."

"Until you know what?" I asked, sharply.

He pulled himself together with a jerk, as it were, and answered with a kind of forced carelessness.

"Until I know every inch of it, of course. There are lots of tribes I

have not yet visited."

"Including the Pongo," I said. "By the way, if I can get the money together for a trip up there, I suppose you mean to come too, don't you? If not, the thing's off so far as I am concerned. You see, I am reckoning on you to get us through the Mazitu and into Pongo-land by the help of your friends."

"Certainly I mean to come. In fact, if you don't go, I shall start alone. I intend to explore Pongo-land even if I never come out of it again."

Once more I looked at him as I answered:

"You are ready to risk a great deal for a flower, John. Or are you looking for more than a flower? If so, I hope you will tell me the truth."

This I said as I was aware that Brother John had a foolish objection to uttering, or even acting lies.

"Well, Allan, as you put it like that, the truth is that I heard something more about the Pongo than I told you up country. It was after I had operated on that Kalubi, or I would have tried to get in alone. But this I could not do then as I have said."

"And what did you hear?"

"I heard that they had a white goddess as well as a white god."

"Well, what of it? A female gorilla, I suppose."

"Nothing, except that goddesses have always interested me. Good night."

"You are an odd old fish," I remarked after him, "and what is more you have got something up your sleeve. Well, I'll have it down one day.

Meanwhile, I wonder whether the whole thing is a lie, no; not a lie, an hallucination. It can't be--because of that orchid. No one can explain away the orchid. A queer people, these Pongo, with their white god and goddess and their Holy Flower. But after all Africa is a land of queer people, and of queer gods too."

And now the story shifts away to England. (Don't be afraid, my adventurous reader, if ever I have one, it is coming back to Africa again in a very few pages.)

Mr. Charles Scroope and I left Durban a day or two after my last conversation with Brother John. At Cape Town we caught the mail, a wretched little boat you would think it now, which after a long and wearisome journey at length landed us safe at Plymouth. Our companions

on that voyage were very dull. I have forgotten most of them, but one lady I do remember. I imagine that she must have commenced life as a barmaid, for she had the orthodox tow hair and blowsy appearance. At any rate, she was the wife of a wine-merchant who had made a fortune at the Cape. Unhappily, however, she had contracted too great a liking for her husband's wares, and after dinner was apt to become talkative. For some reason or other she took a particular aversion to me. Oh! I can see her now, seated in that saloon with the oil lamp swinging over her head (she always chose the position under the oil lamp because it showed off her diamonds). And I can hear her too. "Don't bring any of your elephant-hunting manners here, Mr. Allan" (with an emphasis on the Allan) "Quatermain, they are not fit for polite society. You should go and brush your hair, Mr. Quatermain." (I may explain that my hair sticks up naturally.)

Then would come her little husband's horrified "Hush! hush! you are quite insulting, my dear."

Oh! why do I remember it all after so many years when I have even forgotten the people's names? One of those little things that stick in the mind, I suppose. The Island of Ascension, where we called, sticks also with its long swinging rollers breaking in white foam, its bare mountain peak capped with green, and the turtles in the ponds. Those poor turtles. We brought two of them home, and I used to look at them lying on their backs in the forecabin flapping their fins feebly. One of them died, and I got the butcher to save me the shell. Afterwards I

gave it as a wedding present to Mr. and Mrs. Scroope, nicely polished and lined. I meant it for a work-basket, and was overwhelmed with confusion when some silly lady said at the marriage, and in the hearing of the bride and bridegroom, that it was the most beautiful cradle she had ever seen. Of course, like a fool, I tried to explain, whereon everybody tittered.

But why do I write of such trifles that have nothing to do with my story?

I mentioned that I had ventured to send a letter to Miss Margaret Manners about Mr. Charles Scroope, in which I said incidentally that if the hero should happen to live I should probably bring him home by the next mail. Well, we got into Plymouth about eight o'clock in the morning, on a mild, November day, and shortly afterwards a tug arrived to take off the passengers and mails; also some cargo. I, being an early riser, watched it come and saw upon the deck a stout lady wrapped in furs, and by her side a very pretty, fair-haired young woman clad in a neat serge dress and a pork-pie hat. Presently a steward told me that someone wished to speak to me in the saloon. I went and found these two standing side by side.

"I believe you are Mr. Allan Quatermain," said the stout lady. "Where is Mr. Scroope whom I understand you have brought home? Tell me at once."

Something about her appearance and fierce manner of address alarmed me



so much that I could only answer feebly:

"Below, madam, below."

"There, my dear," said the stout lady to her companion, "I warned you to be prepared for the worst. Bear up; do not make a scene before all these people. The ways of Providence are just and inscrutable. It is your own temper that was to blame. You should never have sent the poor man off to these heathen countries."

Then, turning to me, she added sharply: "I suppose he is embalmed; we should like to bury him in Essex."

"Embalmed!" I gasped. "Embalmed! Why, the man is in his bath, or was a few minutes ago."

In another second that pretty young lady who had been addressed was weeping with her head upon my shoulder.

"Margaret!" exclaimed her companion (she was a kind of heavy aunt), "I told you not to make a scene in public. Mr. Quatermain, as Mr. Scroope is alive, would you ask him to be so good as to come here."

Well, I fetched him, half-shaved, and the rest of the business may be imagined. It is a very fine thing to be a hero with a big H. Henceforth (thanks to me) that was Charlie Scroope's lot in life. He has

grandchildren now, and they all think him a hero. What is more, he does not contradict them. I went down to the lady's place in Essex, a fine property with a beautiful old house. On the night I arrived there was a dinner-party of twenty-four people. I had to make a speech about Charlie Scroope and the leopard. I think it was a good speech. At any rate everybody cheered, including the servants, who had gathered at the back of the big hall.

I remember that to complete the story I introduced several other leopards, a mother and two three-part-grown cubs, also a wounded buffalo, and told how Mr. Scroope finished them off one after the other with a hunting knife. The thing was to watch his face as the history proceeded. Luckily he was sitting next to me and I could kick him under the table. It was all very amusing, and very happy also, for these two really loved each other. Thank God that I, or rather Brother John, was able to bring them together again.

It was during that stay of mine in Essex, by the way, that I first met Lord Ragnall and the beautiful Miss Holmes with whom I was destined to experience some very strange adventures in the after years.

After this interlude I got to work. Someone told me that there was a firm in the City that made a business of selling orchids by auction, flowers which at this time were beginning to be very fashionable among

rich horticulturists. This, thought I, would be the place for me to show my treasure. Doubtless Messrs. May and Primrose--that was their world-famed style--would be able to put me in touch with opulent orchidists who would not mind venturing a couple of thousands on the chance of receiving a share in a flower that, according to Brother John, should be worth untold gold. At any rate, I would try.

So on a certain Friday, about half-past twelve, I sought out the place of business of Messrs. May and Primrose, bearing with me the golden *Cypripedium*, which was now enclosed in a flat tin case.

As it happened I chose an unlucky day and hour, for on arriving at the office and asking for Mr. May, I was informed that he was away in the country valuing.

"Then I would like to see Mr. Primrose," I said.

"Mr. Primrose is round at the Rooms selling," replied the clerk, who appeared to be very busy.

"Where are the Rooms?" I asked.

"Out of the door, turn to the left, turn to the left again and under the clock," said the clerk, and closed the shutter.

So disgusted was I with his rudeness that I nearly gave up the

enterprise. Thinking better of it, however, I followed the directions given, and in a minute or two found myself in a narrow passage that led to a large room. To one who had never seen anything of the sort before, this room offered a curious sight. The first thing I observed was a notice on the wall to the effect that customers were not allowed to smoke pipes. I thought to myself that orchids must be curious flowers if they could distinguish between the smoke of a cigar and a pipe, and stepped into the room. To my left was a long table covered with pots of the most beautiful flowers that I had ever seen; all of them orchids. Along the wall and opposite were other tables closely packed with withered roots which I concluded were also those of orchids. To my inexperienced eye the whole lot did not look worth five shillings, for they seemed to be dead.

At the head of the room stood the rostrum, where sat a gentleman with an extremely charming face. He was engaged in selling by auction so rapidly that the clerk at his side must have had difficulty in keeping a record of the lots and their purchasers. In front of him was a horseshoe table, round which sat buyers. The end of this table was left unoccupied so that the porters might exhibit each lot before it was put up for sale. Standing under the rostrum was yet another table, a small one, upon which were about twenty pots of flowers, even more wonderful than those on the large table. A notice stated that these would be sold at one-thirty precisely. All about the room stood knots of men (such ladies as were present sat at the table), many of whom had lovely orchids in their buttonholes. These, I found out afterwards, were dealers and

amateurs. They were a kindly-faced set of people, and I took a liking to them.

The whole place was quaint and pleasant, especially by contrast with the horrible London fog outside. Squeezing my small person into a corner where I was in nobody's way, I watched the proceedings for a while. Suddenly an agreeable voice at my side asked me if I would like a look at the catalogue. I glanced at the speaker, and in a sense fell in love with him at once--as I have explained before, I am one of those to whom a first impression means a great deal. He was not very tall, though strong-looking and well-made enough. He was not very handsome, though none so ill-favoured. He was just an ordinary fair young Englishman, four or five-and-twenty years of age, with merry blue eyes and one of the pleasantest expressions that I ever saw. At once I felt that he was a sympathetic soul and full of the milk of human kindness. He was dressed in a rough tweed suit rather worn, with the orchid that seemed to be the badge of all this tribe in his buttonhole. Somehow the costume suited his rather pink and white complexion and rumped fair hair, which I could see as he was sitting on his cloth hat.

"Thank you, no," I answered, "I did not come here to buy. I know nothing about orchids," I added by way of explanation, "except a few I have seen growing in Africa, and this one," and I tapped the tin case which I held under my arm.

"Indeed," he said. "I should like to hear about the African orchids.

What is it you have in the case, a plant or flowers?"

"One flower only. It is not mine. A friend in Africa asked me to--well, that is a long story which might not interest you."

"I'm not sure. I suppose it must be a Cymbidium scape from the size."

I shook my head. "That's not the name my friend mentioned. He called it a Cypripedium."

The young man began to grow curious. "One Cypripedium in all that large case? It must be a big flower."

"Yes, my friend said it is the biggest ever found. It measures twenty-four inches across the wings, petals I think he called them, and about a foot across the back part."

"Twenty-four inches across the petals and a foot across the dorsal sepal!" said the young man in a kind of gasp, "and a Cypripedium! Sir, surely you are joking?"

"Sir," I answered indignantly, "I am doing nothing of the sort. Your remark is tantamount to telling me that I am speaking a falsehood. But, of course, for all I know, the thing may be some other kind of flower."

"Let me see it. In the name of the goddess Flora let me see it!"

I began to undo the case. Indeed it was already half-open when two other gentlemen, who had either overheard some of our conversation or noted my companion's excited look, edged up to us. I observed that they also wore orchids in their buttonholes.

"Hullo! Somers," said one of them in a tone of false geniality, "what have you got there?"

"What has your friend got there?" asked the other.

"Nothing," replied the young man who had been addressed as Somers, "nothing at all; that is--only a case of tropical butterflies."

"Oh! butterflies," said No. 1 and sauntered away. But No. 2, a keen-looking person with the eye of a hawk, was not so easily satisfied.

"Let us see these butterflies," he said to me.

"You can't," ejaculated the young man. "My friend is afraid lest the damp should injure their colours. Ain't you, Brown?"

"Yes, I am, Somers," I replied, taking his cue and shutting the tin case with a snap.

Then the hawk-eyed person departed, also grumbling, for that story about

the damp stuck in his throat.

"Orchidist!" whispered the young man. "Dreadful people, orchidists, so jealous. Very rich, too, both of them. Mr. Brown--I hope that is your name, though I admit the chances are against it."

"They are," I replied, "my name is Allan Quatermain."

"Ah! much better than Brown. Well, Mr. Allan Quatermain, there's a private room in this place to which I have admittance. Would you mind coming with that----" here the hawk-eyed gentleman strolled past again, "that case of butterflies?"

"With pleasure," I answered, and followed him out of the auction chamber down some steps through the door to the left, and ultimately into a little cupboard-like room lined with shelves full of books and ledgers.

He closed the door and locked it.

"Now," he said in a tone of the villain in a novel who at last has come face to face with the virtuous heroine, "now we are alone. Mr. Quatermain, let me see--those butterflies."

I placed the case on a deal table which stood under a skylight in the room. I opened it; I removed the cover of wadding, and there, pressed between two sheets of glass and quite uninjured after all its



journeyings, appeared the golden flower, glorious even in death, and by its side the broad green leaf.

The young gentleman called Somers looked at it till I thought his eyes would really start out of his head. He turned away muttering something and looked again.

"Oh! Heavens," he said at last, "oh! Heavens, is it possible that such a thing can exist in this imperfect world? You haven't faked it, Mr. Half--I mean Quatermain, have you?"

"Sir," I said, "for the second time you are making insinuations. Good morning," and I began to shut up the case.

"Don't be offhanded," he exclaimed. "Pity the weaknesses of a poor sinner. You don't understand. If only you understood, you would understand."

"No," I said, "I am bothered if I do."

"Well, you will when you begin to collect orchids. I'm not mad, really, except perhaps on this point, Mr. Quatermain,"--this in a low and thrilling voice--"that marvellous *Cypripedium*--your friend is right, it is a *Cypripedium*--is worth a gold mine."

"From my experience of gold mines I can well believe that," I said

tartly, and, I may add, prophetically.

"Oh! I mean a gold mine in the figurative and colloquial sense, not as the investor knows it," he answered. "That is, the plant on which it grew is priceless. Where is the plant, Mr. Quatermain?"

"In a rather indefinite locality in Africa east by south," I replied. "I can't place it to within three hundred miles."

"That's vague, Mr. Quatermain. I have no right to ask it, seeing that you know nothing of me, but I assure you I am respectable, and in short, would you mind telling me the story of this flower?"

"I don't think I should," I replied, a little doubtfully. Then, after another good look at him, suppressing all names and exact localities, I gave him the outline of the tale, explaining that I wanted to find someone who would finance an expedition to the remote and romantic spot where this particular *Cypripedium* was believed to grow.

Just as I finished my narrative, and before he had time to comment on it, there came a violent knocking at the door.

"Mr. Stephen," said a voice, "are you there, Mr. Stephen?"

"By Jove! that's Briggs," exclaimed the young man. "Briggs is my father's manager. Shut up the case, Mr. Quatermain. Come in, Briggs," he

went on, unlocking the door slowly. "What is it?"

"It is a good deal," replied a thin and agitated person who thrust himself through the opening door. "Your father, I mean Sir Alexander, has come to the office unexpectedly and is in a nice taking because he didn't find you there, sir. When he discovered that you had gone to the orchid sale he grew furious, sir, furious, and sent me to fetch you."

"Did he?" replied Mr. Somers in an easy and unruffled tone. "Well, tell Sir Alexander I am coming at once. Now please go, Briggs, and tell him I am coming at once."

Briggs departed not too willingly.

"I must leave you, Mr. Quatermain," said Mr. Somers as he shut the door behind him. "But will you promise me not to show that flower to anyone until I return? I'll be back within half an hour."

"Yes, Mr. Somers. I'll wait half an hour for you in the sale room, and I promise that no one shall see that flower till you return."

"Thank you. You are a good fellow, and I promise you shall lose nothing by your kindness if I can help it."

We went together into the sale room, where some thought suddenly struck Mr. Somers.

"By Jove!" he said, "I nearly forgot about that Odontoglossum. Where's Woodden? Oh! come here, Woodden, I want to speak to you."

The person called Woodden obeyed. He was a man of about fifty, indefinite in colouring, for his eyes were very light-blue or grey and his hair was sandy, tough-looking and strongly made, with big hands that showed signs of work, for the palms were horny and the nails worn down. He was clad in a suit of shiny black, such as folk of the labouring class wear at a funeral. I made up my mind at once that he was a gardener.

"Woodden," said Mr. Somers, "this gentleman here has got the most wonderful orchid in the whole world. Keep your eye on him and see that he isn't robbed. There are people in this room, Mr. Quatermain, who would murder you and throw your body into the Thames for that flower," he added, darkly.

On receipt of this information Woodden rocked a little on his feet as though he felt the premonitory movements of an earthquake. It was a habit of his whenever anything astonished him. Then, fixing his pale eye upon me in a way which showed that my appearance surprised him, he pulled a lock of his sandy hair with his thumb and finger and said:

"Servant, sir, and where might this horchid be?"

I pointed to the tin case.

"Yes, it's there," went on Mr. Somers, "and that's what you've got to watch. Mr. Quatermain, if anyone attempts to rob you, call for Woodden and he will knock them down. He's my gardener, you know, and entirely to be trusted, especially if it is a matter of knocking anyone down."

"Aye, I'll knock him down surely," said Woodden, doubling his great fist and looking round him with a suspicious eye.

"Now listen, Woodden. Have you looked at that *Odontoglossum Pavo*, and if so, what do you think of it?" and he nodded towards a plant which stood in the centre of the little group that was placed on the small table beneath the auctioneer's desk. It bore a spray of the most lovely white flowers. On the top petal (if it is a petal), and also on the lip of each of these rounded flowers was a blotch or spot of which the general effect was similar to the iridescent eye on the tail feathers of a peacock, whence, I suppose, the flower was named "Pavo," or Peacock.

"Yes, master, and I think it the beautifulest thing that ever I saw. There isn't a 'glossum in England like that there 'glossum Paving," he added with conviction, and rocked again as he said the word. "But there's plenty after it. I say they're a-smelling round that blossom like, like--dawgs round a rat hole. And" (this triumphantly) "they don't do that for nothing."

"Quite so, Woodden, you have got a logical mind. But, look here, we must have that 'Pavo' whatever it costs. Now the Governor has sent for me. I'll be back presently, but I might be detained. If so, you've got to bid on my behalf, for I daren't trust any of these agents. Here's your authority," and he scribbled on a card, "Woodden, my gardener, has directions to bid for me.--S.S." "Now, Woodden," he went on, when he had given the card to an attendant who passed it up to the auctioneer, "don't you make a fool of yourself and let that 'Pavo' slip through your fingers."

In another instant he was gone.

"What did the master say, sir?" asked Woodden of me. "That I was to get that there 'Paving' whatever it cost?"

"Yes," I said, "that's what he said. I suppose it will fetch a good deal--several pounds."

"Maybe, sir, can't tell. All I know is that I've got to buy it as you can bear me witness. Master, he ain't one to be crossed for money. What he wants, he'll have, that is if it be in the orchid line."

"I suppose you are fond of orchids, too, Mr. Woodden?"

"Fond of them, sir? Why, I loves 'em!" (Here he rocked.) "Don't feel for nothing else in the same way; not even for my old woman" (then with a

burst of enthusiasm) "no, not even for the master himself, and I'm fond enough of him, God knows! But, begging your pardon, sir" (with a pull at his forelock), "would you mind holding that tin of yours a little tighter? I've got to keep an eye on that as well as on 'O. Paving,' and I just see'd that chap with the tall hat alooking at it suspicious."

After this we separated. I retired into my corner, while Woodden took his stand by the table, with one eye fixed on what he called the "O. Paving" and the other on me and my tin case.

An odd fish truly, I thought to myself. Positive, the old woman; Comparative, his master; Superlative, the orchid tribe. Those were his degrees of affection. Honest and brave and a good fellow though, I bet.

The sale languished. There were so many lots of one particular sort of dried orchid that buyers could not be found for them at a reasonable price, and many had to be bought in. At length the genial Mr. Primrose in the rostrum addressed the audience.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I quite understand that you didn't come here to-day to buy a rather poor lot of *Cattleya Mossiæ*. You came to buy, or to bid for, or to see sold the most wonderful *Odontoglossum* that has ever been flowered in this country, the property of a famous firm of importers whom I congratulate upon their good fortune in having obtained such a gem. Gentlemen, this miraculous flower ought to adorn a royal greenhouse. But there it is, to be taken away by whoever will pay the

most for it, for I am directed to see that it will be sold without reserve. Now, I think," he added, running his eye over the company, "that most of our great collectors are represented in this room to-day. It is true that I do not see that spirited and liberal young orchidist, Mr. Somers, but he has left his worthy head-gardener, Mr. Woodden, than whom there is no finer judge of an orchid in England" (here Woodden rocked violently) "to bid for him, as I hope, for the glorious flower of which I have been speaking. Now, as it is exactly half-past one, we will proceed to business. Smith, hand the 'Odontoglossum Pavo' round, that everyone may inspect its beauties, and be careful you don't let it fall. Gentlemen, I must ask you not to touch it or to defile its purity with tobacco smoke. Eight perfect flowers in bloom, gentlemen, and four--no, five more to open. A strong plant in perfect health, six pseudo-bulbs with leaves, and three without. Two black leads which I am advised can be separated off at the proper time. Now, what bids for the 'Odontoglossum Pavo.' Ah! I wonder who will have the honour of becoming the owner of this perfect, this unmatched production of Nature. Thank you, sir--three hundred. Four. Five. Six. Seven in three places. Eight. Nine. Ten. Oh! gentlemen, let us get on a little faster. Thank you, sir--fifteen. Sixteen. It is against you, Mr Woodden. Ah! thank you, seventeen."

There came a pause in the fierce race for "O. Pavo," which I occupied in reducing seventeen hundred shillings to pounds sterling.

My word! I thought to myself, £85 is a goodish price to pay for one



plant, however rare. Woodden is acting up to his instructions with a vengeance.

The pleading voice of Mr. Primrose broke in upon my meditations.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" he said, "surely you are not going to allow the most wondrous production of the floral world, on which I repeat there is no reserve, to be knocked down at this miserable figure. Come, come. Well, if I must, I must, though after such a disgrace I shall get no

sleep to-night. One," and his hammer fell for the first time. "Think, gentlemen, upon my position, think what the eminent owners, who with their usual delicacy have stayed away, will say to me when I am obliged to tell them the disgraceful truth. Two," and his hammer fell a second time. "Smith, hold up that flower. Let the company see it. Let them know what they are losing."

Smith held up the flower at which everybody glared. The little ivory hammer circled round Mr. Primrose's head. It was about to fall, when a quiet man with a long beard who hitherto had not joined in the bidding, lifted his head and said softly:

"Eighteen hundred."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Primrose, "I thought so. I thought that the owner of the greatest collection in England would not see this treasure slip from

his grasp without a struggle. Against you, Mr. Woodden."

"Nineteen, sir," said Woodden in a stony voice.

"Two thousand," echoed the gentleman with the long beard.

"Twenty-one hundred," said Woodden.

"That's right, Mr. Woodden," cried Mr. Primrose, "you are indeed representing your principal worthily. I feel sure that you do not mean to stop for a few miserable pounds."

"Not if I knows it," ejaculated Woodden. "I has my orders and I acts up to them."

"Twenty-two hundred," said Long-beard.

"Twenty-three," echoed Woodden.

"Oh, damn!" shouted Long-beard and rushed from the room.

"'Odontoglossum Pavo' is going for twenty-three hundred, only twenty-tree hundred," cried the auctioneer. "Any advance on twenty-three hundred? What? None? Then I must do my duty. One. Two. For the last time--no advance? Three. Gone to Mr. Woodden, bidding for his principal, Mr. Somers."

The hammer fell with a sharp tap, and at this moment my young friend sauntered into the room.

"Well, Wooden," he said, "have they put the 'Pavo' up yet?"

"It's up and it's down, sir. I've bought him right enough."

"The deuce you have! What did it fetch?"

Wooden scratched his head.

"I don't rightly know, sir, never was good at figures, not having much book learning, but it's twenty-three something."

"£23? No, it would have brought more than that. By Jingo! it must be £230. That's pretty stiff, but still, it may be worth it."

At this moment Mr. Primrose, who, leaning over his desk, was engaged in animated conversation with an excited knot of orchid fanciers, looked up:

"Oh! there you are, Mr. Somers," he said. "In the name of all this company let me congratulate you on having become the owner of the matchless 'Odontoglossum Pavo' for what, under all the circumstances, I consider the quite moderate price of £2,300."

Really that young man took it very well. He shivered slightly and turned a little pale, that is all. Woodden rocked to and fro like a tree about to fall. I and my tin box collapsed together in the corner. Yes, I was so surprised that my legs seemed to give way under me. People began to talk, but above the hum of the conversation I heard young Somers say in a low voice:

"Woodden, you're a born fool." Also the answer: "That's what my mother always told me, master, and she ought to know if anyone did. But what's wrong now? I obeyed orders and bought 'O. Paving."

"Yes. Don't bother, my good fellow, it's my fault, not yours. I'm the born fool. But heavens above! how am I to face this?" Then, recovering himself, he strolled up to the rostrum and said a few words to the auctioneer. Mr. Primrose nodded, and I heard him answer:

"Oh, that will be all right, sir, don't bother. We can't expect an account like this to be settled in a minute. A month hence will do."

Then he went on with the sale.