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The Golden Bait

BY CHARLES KINGSTON.

It was not often that Samuel Chilten was pleased with himself, for by trade he was a jeweller, and by nature a pessimist. But as he sat in the little room at the back of his shop in Kensington, London, and surveyed the massive gold plate he had purchased that morning for five hundred pounds, he could not repress a thrill at the thought that he was certain to make a hundred per cent. profit.

Five minutes later, when he had carried it into the shop and had arranged it temptingly in the window, he congratulated himself on his life-long habit of keeping either on his person or at his private address a sum in bank notes equaling half his capital. The custom had many a time enabled him to clinch a bargain because his rivals had been unable to produce cash on the spot.

Chilten wondered why Mrs. Cavendish had not sent for a Bond Street jeweller, but she was very old and obviously in urgent need of money, and it must have been because his shop was within a couple of hundred yards of her house that she had given him the opportunity of his lifetime.

The old jeweller did not expect to effect an immediate sale, knowing that in these days there are very few people who can afford to purchase a thousand pounds' worth of solid gold plate. But there was always the possibility of disposing of it to a committee or club secretary in search of a suitable presentation.

Up to midday the only customer was the purchaser of a cheap serviette ring, and by three o'clock Chilten had taken exactly eight shilling and sixpence. When the jeweller saw a man of about thirty with a military bearing appear at the door, he sized him up as a borrower rather than a buyer.

"Has Captain Cairns been here yet, sir?" asked the man.

"Who is Captain Cairns?" "He's my governor, answered the man, gravely, "and he told me to call for him at three o'clock. He mentioned before he went to lunch with the general that he had seen some gold plate in your window which he intended to buy, and which he wanted me to carry to his hotel. You see, the captain lost his right arm in the war, though, in any case, I don't suppose he would carry the parcel himself."

Chilten grunted. He did not like the look of the manservant, and what could an Army officer want with gold plate priced at one thousand pounds? "If you don't mind, sir," said the stranger apologetically, "I'll call back in half an hour. You might tell the captain that when you see him."

The shop door closed and the jeweller fell into a reverie flooded with

memories of former attempts to defraud him. He smiled as he reminded himself that there were always at least two crooks in every swindle, and that the usual procedure was for one to prepare the way for the other.

Captain Cairns might be all that he was represented to be by his manservant, but Samuel Chilten resolved that even if the officer brought a dozen generals to prove his honesty, he would not permit the gold plate to leave his shop until it had been replaced by its equivalent in hard cash. No cheques for him.

It was exactly half-past three when the little bell over the door tinkled again, and Samuel Chilten, rising slowly from his chair, confronted a tall, distinguished-looking man of not more than forty, whose empty right sleeve identified him at once as Captain Cairns.

"Has my man been here?" said the new-comer.

"Yes, sir," answered the jeweller, quickly. "He called at three o'clock, and when he found you weren't here he said he would return in half an hour. I presume I am addressing Captain Cairns?"

The stranger nodded. "I was passing your shop this morning," he said, "and I noticed the gold plate in your window. What do you want for it?" "A thousand pounds," answered Chilten.

"Well, I expect it's worth it," said Captain Cairns, smiling. "I don't want it for myself—couldn't afford it, in fact—but my old colonel is retiring at the end of next month, and we have decided to make a special presentation to him. I am treasurer of the fund, and as we have collected fifteen hundred pounds I think we can afford to give him gold plate."

"I am sure he would be pleased with it," murmured Chilten. "It was only purchased by me this morning from a lady who married into a very distinguished family. She parted with it because she has no heir, and, as she explained, if it became known that she had such valuable stuff in her house, it would attract half the burglars in London."

"I understand," said Capt. Cairns. "Now, Mr. Chilten, you don't know me and for all you know to the contrary I might be no more Captain Cairns than a professional burglar."

The jeweller laughed heartily. "I assure you, sir," he said, decisively, "that no one would take you for anything but a military gentleman. I am sorry to see you have lost an arm."

"It's beastly awkward," said the officer, genially, "but it might be worse." His face clouded. Then he forced a laugh and turned to the gold plate which the jeweller had placed on the counter.

"This will be just the thing," he said, with subdued enthusiasm. "By the way, have I time to run round to the bank and cash a cheque?"

The moment he said this Samuel Chilten's suspicions were reborn. He felt that the officer must be aware that the banks had been closed for more than half an hour. He pulled himself together and set his teeth and waited for his would-be customer to hint that he must pay by cheque. Cheque! The old man had difficulty in repressing the desire to laugh at the bare suggestion.

"I am afraid you are too late, sir," he said, eyeing Captain Cairns steadily.

"What a nuisance!" exclaimed the officer, irritably. "We were such a merry party at lunch that the time slipped by without my noticing it."

"If you like, sir," said the jeweller, "I will put it in my safe and reserve it for you until to-morrow. Then you can call and complete the transaction."

It did not surprise the old man that Captain Cairns should reject his offer. It was exactly what he expected.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," he remarked, gravely. "I must take the plate home to-night."

Chilten repressed his desire to laugh. What an old trick the so-called captain was playing! His pretended customer was simply repeating the ancient and much-used formulas of the conventional jewel-thief. And yet in the twentieth century and within a short distance of Kensington High Street, this specimen of the criminal class expected to hoodwink an up-to-

date London jeweller with fifty years' experience behind him!

A suggestive silence which lasted a couple of minutes was ended by the arrival of the manservant.

"You're late, Simpson," said Captain Cairns, sternly, "but that doesn't matter now. You can help me out of a difficulty." Addressing the jeweller, he continued: "I have just remembered that my wife, who is staying at the Carlton Hotel, will be able to get me the thousand pounds in notes. Her brother is manager of a bank in Piccadilly. He lives quite near it. I will send Simpson with a note to her, and when he brings the cash I will settle the account with you and take away the plate."

This was more than satisfactory to Chilten, and he was so delighted that he regretted having suspected the bona fides of the officer.

"Nothing could suit me better, sir," he hastened to say. "Here are pen and paper." He was in the act of handing his chair across the counter when Captain Cairns stopped him.

"As I haven't mastered the art of writing with my left hand," he said, apologetically, "perhaps you will write the message to my wife at my dictation, and I will put my initials to it."

"With pleasure, sir," answered the jeweller, and took up the pen.

"My dear Mary," the officer dictated, "by the greatest piece of good luck I have the chance of making a bargain. Some gold plate has been offered to me for one thousand pounds, cash down, and as it is exactly what I want I have decided to buy it. Send me one thousand pounds in notes by bearer as quickly as you can." Captain Cairns read the document through.

"Thank you," he murmured, politely, taking the pen in his left hand and scribbling his initials. Then he handed it to his manservant, who hurried off.

"As he is likely to be away for quite an hour I will pay a call in the neighborhood," the officer remarked. "In the meantime, you might make a handy parcel of the gold plate so that my man can carry it to my hotel immediately you have given him the receipt."

"It shall be ready for you, sir," said Chilten, who was certain that this was to be the greatest day in his life.

At a quarter past four the gold plate was lying well wrapped in the softest and most delicate paper, with a strong brown covering and an ingenious arrangement of the string to enable it to be carried easily, and at half-past five Samuel Chilten was staring at the receipt he had prepared in the name of Captain Cairns. At six o'clock both the receipt and the gold plate were still in the shop and the officer had yet to re-appear; but the jeweller was not surprised; and when he closed for the day at seven and the gold plate was still in his possession he was not anxious.

It was obvious that Mrs. Cairns had been unable to get the cheque changed and it was more than probable that the reason was that her brother, the bank manager, had not been at home when she had called at his flat.

On the other hand, if Captain Cairns were a crook no harm had been done; he had been outwitted and defeated. Little wonder that the jeweller was smiling when he let himself into his house at a quarter to eight.

Mrs. Chilten, instead of greeting him with the customary perfunctory kiss, exclaimed on catching sight of him. "Did you get the money all right, Sam?"

"What money do you mean?" he asked, surprised but not excited.

"Why, the thousand pounds in bank notes I sent to you at four o'clock."

The old man began to tremble, but his common sense told him that his wife must be laboring under a delusion.

"You're joking, Mary," he exclaimed, forcing a laugh. "Are you referring to the five hundred pounds I took this morning to complete the little transaction with Mrs. Cavendish? Why, I didn't know that you had heard about it. I was keeping it a secret until I had clinched the bargain."

"Your wits are wandering, Sam," she said. "Do you think I don't know your writing after thirty years? Didn't you write a note in your shop this afternoon telling me that you had got the opportunity of a lifetime and that I was to send by the bearer of the letter a thousand pounds to pay for some gold plate?"

Mr. Chilten collapsed on to the nearest chair. Through the hazy mist and the doubts that enveloped his brain certain figures were forming. The chief figure was that of "Captain Cairns" dictating the letter he had written. He experienced a pang in the region of his heart when he realized for the first time that the initials of "Captain Cairns" were the same as his own. Samuel Chilten and Stephen Cairns. At the same time he had not thought of it, and he had been quite oblivious to the coincidence in the Christian names of his wife and the alleged wife of the swindler.

"Show me the letter," he murmured, feebly, and when it was placed in his hands he read it a dozen times.

"I have discovered a new swindle," he said, but there was no satisfaction in his tone, and there was even less when all the attempts to trace the bank notes back to "Captain Cairns"

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failed because that ingenious rascal had changed them within a few hours of their receipt.
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