

so repugnant was the piece of paper to the touch. Now that the time had come to part with the so remaining solace he possessed, he felt unable to yield it.

This, however, was a weakness he must not indulge. He looked at the paper perfunctorily, and then he gave a little exclamation. The cheque was made out in his favour for ten thousand pounds.

"I don't understand," said Jim. "Is there not some mistake?"

"You must constrain your modesty a little, that is all," said Cheriton. "People tell me it will be worth every penny of this sum to the next generation. It is pleasant sometimes to anticipate the verdict of posterity."

Jim Lascelles did not know how to act or what to say. In his judgment this was the most Quixotic proceeding he had ever encountered.

"Really, Lord Cheriton," he said, "I don't feel that there are sufficient grounds upon which I can accept such a sum as this."

"A bargain is a bargain," said Cheriton. "I hold your promise that I am to purchase the picture on my own terms."

In the flood tide of his bewilderment Jim Lascelles had perforce to remain silent.

"Don't forget, my dear Lascelles, that the highest pleasure that is given to any man is to adopt the rôle of Maecenas. And are you aware that the Red House at Widdiford is in the market, and that six thousand pounds will purchase it?"

Jim flinched a little. A deep flush overspread his face. This was sacred ground, upon which it behoved the outside world to tread warily.

"I hope you don't infer that the Red House at Widdiford means nothing to you?"