

III

LEAVING his house, Chilcote walked forward quickly and aimlessly. With the sting of the outer air the recollection of last night's adventure came back upon him. Since the hour of his waking it had hung about with vague persistence, but now in the clear light of day it seemed to stand out with a fuller peculiarity.

The thing was preposterous, nevertheless it was genuine. He was wearing the overcoat he had worn the night before, and, acting on impulse, he thrust his hand into the pocket and drew out the stranger's card.

"Mr. John Loder!" He read the name over as he walked along, and it mechanically repeated itself in his brain—falling into measure with his steps. Who was John Loder? What was he? The questions tantalized him till his pace unconsciously increased. The thought that two men so absurdly alike could inhabit the same city and remain unknown to each other faced him as a problem: it tangled with his personal worries and aggravated them. There seemed to be almost a danger in such an extraordinary likeness. He began to regret his impetuosity in thrusting his card upon the man. Then, again, how he had let himself go on the subject of Lexington! How narrowly he had escaped compromise! He turned hot and cold at the recollection

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of what he had said and what he might have said. Then for the first time he paused in his walk and looked about him.

On leaving Grosvenor Square he had turned westward, moving rapidly till the Marble Arch was reached; there, still oblivious to his surroundings, he had crossed the roadway to the Edgware Road, passing along it to the labyrinth of shabby streets that lie behind Paddington. Now, as he glanced about him, he saw with some surprise how far he had come.

The damp remnants of the fog still hung about the house-tops in a filmy veil; there were no glimpses of green to break the monotony of tone; all was quiet, dingy, neglected. But to Chilcote the shabbiness was restful, the subdued atmosphere a satisfaction. Among these sad houses, these passers-by, each filled with his own concerns, he experienced a sense of respite and relief. In the fashionable streets that bounded his own horizon, if a man paused in his walk to work out an idea he instantly drew a crowd of inquisitive or contemptuous eyes; here, if a man halted for half an hour it was nobody's business but his own.

Enjoying this thought, he wandered on for close upon an hour, moving from one street to another with steps that were listless or rapid, as inclination prompted; then, still acting with vagrant aimlessness, he stopped in his wanderings and entered a small eating-house.

The place was low-ceiled and dirty, the air hot and steaming with the smell of food, but Chilcote passed through the door and moved to one of the tables with no expression of disgust, and with far less furtive watchfulness than he used in his own house. By a curious mental twist he felt greater freedom, larger

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opportunities in drab surroundings such as these than in the broad issues and weighty responsibilities of his own life. Choosing a corner seat, he called for coffee; and there, protected by shadow and wrapped in cigarette smoke, he set about imagining himself some vagrant unit who had slipped his moorings and was blissfully adrift.

The imagination was pleasant while it lasted, but with him nothing was permanent. Of late the greater part of his sufferings had been comprised in the irritable fickleness of all his aims—the distaste for and impossibility of sustained effort in any direction. He had barely lighted a second cigarette when the old restlessness fell upon him; he stirred nervously in his seat, and the cigarette was scarcely burned out when he rose, paid his small bill, and left the shop.

Outside on the pavement he halted, pulled out his watch, and saw that two hours stretched in front before any appointment claimed his attention. He wondered vaguely where he might go to—what he might do in those two hours? In the last few minutes a distaste for solitude had risen in his mind, giving the close street a loneliness that had escaped him before.

As he stood wavering a cab passed slowly down the street. The sight of a well-dressed man roused the cabman; flicking his whip, he passed Chilcote close, feigning to pull up.

The cab suggested civilization. Chilcote's mind veered suddenly and he raised his hand. The vehicle stopped and he climbed in.

"Where, sir?" The cabman peered down through the roof-door.

Chilcote raised his head. "Oh, anywhere near Pall

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Mall," he said. Then, as the horse started forward, he put up his hand and shook the trap-door. "Wait!" he called. "I've changed my mind. Drive to Cadogan Gardens—No. 33."

The distance to Cadogan Gardens was covered quickly. Chilcote had hardly realized that his destination was reached when the cab pulled up. Jumping out, he paid the fare and walked quickly to the hall-door of No. 33.

"Is Lady Astrupp at home?" he asked, sharply, as the door swung back in answer to his knock.

The servant drew back deferentially. "Her ladyship has almost finished lunch, sir," he said.

For answer Chilcote stepped through the door-way and walked half-way across the hall.

"All right," he said. "But don't disturb her on my account. I'll wait in the white room till she has finished." And, without taking further notice of the servant, he began to mount the stairs.

In the room where he had chosen to wait a pleasant wood-fire brightened the dull January afternoon and softened the thick, white curtains, the gilt furniture, and the Venetian vases filled with white roses. Moving straight forward, Chilcote paused by the grate and stretched his hands to the blaze; then, with his usual instability, he turned and passed to a couch that stood a yard or two away.

On the couch, tucked away between a novel and a crystal gazing-ball, was a white Persian kitten, fast asleep. Chilcote picked up the ball and held it between his eyes and the fire; then he laughed superciliously, tossed it back into its place, and caught the kitten's

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tail. The little animal stirred, stretched itself, and began to purr. At the same moment the door of the room opened.

Chilcote turned round. "I particularly said you were not to be disturbed," he began. "Have I merited displeasure?" He spoke fast, with the uneasy tone that so often underran his words.

Lady Astrupp took his hand with a confiding gesture and smiled.

"Never displeasure," she said, lingeringly, and again she smiled. The smile might have struck a close observer as faintly artificial. But what man in Chilcote's frame of mind has time to be observant where women are concerned? The manner of the smile was very sweet and almost caressing—and that sufficed.

"What have you been doing?" she asked, after a moment. "I thought I was quite forgotten." She moved across to the couch, picked up the kitten, and kissed it. "Isn't this sweet?" she added.

She looked very graceful as she turned, holding the little animal up. She was a woman of twenty-seven, but she looked a girl. The outline of her face was pure, the pale gold of her hair almost ethereal, and her tall, slight figure still suggested the suppleness, the possibility of future development, that belongs to youth. She wore a lace-colored gown that harmonized with the room and with the delicacy of her skin.

"Now sit down and rest—or walk about the room. I sha'n't mind which." She nestled into the couch and picked up the crystal ball.

"What is the toy for?" Chilcote looked at her from the mantel-piece, against which he was resting. He had never defined the precise attraction that Lillian

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Astrupp held for him. Her shallowness soothed him; her inconsequent egotism helped him to forget himself. She never asked him how he was, she never expected impossibilities. She let him come and go and act as he pleased, never demanding reasons. Like the kitten, she was charming and graceful and easily amused; it was possible that, also like the kitten, she could scratch and be spiteful on occasion, but that did not weigh with him. He sometimes expressed a vague envy of the late Lord Astrupp; but, even had circumstances permitted, it is doubtful whether he would have chosen to be his successor. Lillian as a friend was delightful, but Lillian as a wife would have been a different consideration.

"What is the toy for?" he asked again.

She looked up slowly. "How cruel of you, Jack! It is my very latest hobby."

It was part of her attraction that she was never without a craze. Each new one was as fleeting as the last, but to each she brought the same delightfully insincere enthusiasm, the same picturesque devotion. Each was a pose, but she posed so sweetly that nobody lost patience.

"You mustn't laugh!" she protested, letting the kitten slip to the ground. "I've had lessons at five guineas each from the most fascinating person—a professional; and I'm becoming quite an adept. Of course I haven't been much beyond the milky appearance yet, but the milky appearance is everything, you know; the rest will come. I am trying to persuade Blanche to let me have a pavilion at her party in March, and gaze for all you dull political people." Again she smiled.

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Chilcote smiled as well. "How is it done?" he asked, momentarily amused.

"Oh, the doing is quite delicious. You sit at a table with the ball in front of you; then you take the subject's hands, spread them out on the table, and stroke them very softly while you gaze into the crystal; that gets up the sympathy, you know." She looked up innocently. "Shall I show you?"

Chilcote moved a small table nearer to the couch and spread his hands upon it, palms downward. "Like this, eh?" he said. Then a ridiculous nervousness seized him and he moved away. "Some other day," he said, quickly. "You can show me some other day. I'm not very fit this afternoon."

If Lillian felt any disappointment, she showed none. "Poor old thing!" she said, softly. "Try to sit here by me and we won't bother about anything." She made a place for him beside her, and as he dropped into it she took his hand and patted it sympathetically.

The touch was soothing, and he bore it patiently enough. After a moment she lifted the hand with a little exclamation of reproof.

"You degenerate person! You have ceased to manicure. What has become of my excellent training?"

Chilcote laughed. "Run to seed," he said, lightly. Then his expression and tone changed. "When a man gets to my age," he added, "little social luxuries don't seem worth while; the social necessities are irksome enough. Personally, I envy the beggar in the street—exempt from shaving, exempt from washing—"

Lillian raised her delicate eyebrows. The sentiment was beyond her perception.

"But manicuring," she said, reproachfully, "when

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you have such nice hands. It was your hands and your eyes, you know, that first appealed to me." She sighed gently, with a touch of sentimental remembrance. "And I thought it so strong of you not to wear rings—it must be such a temptation." She looked down at her own fingers, glittering with jewels.

But the momentary pleasure of her touch was gone. Chilcote drew away his hand and picked up the book that lay between them.

"*Other Men's Shoes!*" he read. "A novel, of course?"

She smiled. "Of course. Such a fantastic story. Two men changing identities."

Chilcote rose and walked back to the mantel-piece.

"Changing identities?" he said, with a touch of interest.

"Yes. One man is an artist, the other a millionaire; one wants to know what fame is like, the other wants to know how it feels to be really sinfully rich. So they exchange experiences for a month." She laughed.

Chilcote laughed as well. "But how?" he asked.

"Oh, I told you the idea was absurd. Fancy two people so much alike that neither their friends nor their servants see any difference! Such a thing couldn't be, could it?"

Chilcote looked down at the fire. "No," he said, doubtfully. "No. I suppose not."

"Of course not. There are likenesses, but not freak likenesses like that."

Chilcote's head was bent as she spoke, but at the last words he lifted it.

"By Jove! I don't know about that!" he said. "Not so very long ago I saw two men so much alike that I—I—" He stopped

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Lillian smiled.

He colored quickly. "You doubt me?" he asked. "My dear Jack!" Her voice was delicately reproachful.

"Then you think that my—my imagination has been playing me tricks?"

"My dear boy! Nothing of the kind. Come back to your place and tell me the whole tale?" She smiled again, and patted the couch invitingly.

But Chilcote's balance had been upset. For the first time he saw Lillian as one of the watchful, suspecting crowd before which he was constantly on guard. Acting on the sensation, he moved suddenly towards the door.

"I—I have an appointment at the House," he said, quickly. "I'll look in another day when—when I'm better company. I know I'm a bear to-day. My nerves, you know." He came back to the couch and took her hand; then he touched her cheek for an instant with his fingers.

"Good-bye," he said. "Take care of yourself—and the kitten," he added, with forced gayety, as he crossed the room.

That afternoon Chilcote's nervous condition reached its height. All day he had avoided the climax, but no evasion can be eternal, and this he realized as he sat in his place on the Opposition benches during the half-hour of wintry twilight that precedes the turning-on of the lights. He realized it in that half-hour, but the application of the knowledge followed later, when the time came for him to question the government on some point relating to a proposed additional dry-dock

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at Talkley, the naval base. Then for the first time he knew that the sufferings of the past months could have a visible as well as a hidden side—could disorganize his daily routine as they had already demoralized his will and character.

The thing came upon him with extraordinary lack of preparation. He sat through the twilight with tolerable calm, his nervousness showing only in the occasional lifting of his hand to his collar and the frequent changing of his position; but when the lights were turned on, and he leaned back in his seat with closed eyes, he became conscious of a curious impression—a disturbing idea that through his closed lids he could see the faces on the opposite side of the House, see the rows of eyes, sleepy, interested, or vigilant. Never before had the sensation presented itself, but, once set up, it ran through all his susceptibilities. By an absurd freak of fancy those varying eyes seemed to pierce through his lids, almost through his eyeballs. The cold perspiration that was his daily horror broke out on his forehead; and at the same moment Fraide, his leader, turned, leaned over the back of his seat, and touched his knee.

Chilcote started and opened his eyes. "I—I believe I was dozing," he said, confusedly.

Fraide smiled his dry, kindly smile. "A fatal admission for a member of the Opposition," he said. "But I was looking for you earlier in the day, Chilcote. There is something behind this Persian affair. I believe it to be a mere first move on Russia's part. You big trading people will find it worth watching."

Chilcote shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "I scarcely believe in it. Lakely

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put a match to the powder in the *St. George's*, but 'twill only be a noise and a puff of smoke."

But Fraide did not smile. "What is the feeling down at Wark?" he asked. "Has it awakened any interest?"

"At Wark? Oh, I—I don't quite know. I have been a little out of touch with Wark in the last few weeks. A man has so many private affairs to look to—" He was uneasy under his chief's scrutiny.

Fraide's lips parted as if to make reply, but with a certain dignified reticence he closed them again and turned away.

Chilcote leaned back in his place and furtively passed his hand over his forehead. His mind was possessed by one consideration—the consideration of himself. He glanced down the crowded, lighted House to the big glass doors; he glanced about him at his colleagues, indifferent or interested; then surreptitiously his fingers strayed to his waistcoat-pocket.

Usually he carried his morphia tablets with him, but to-day by a lapse of memory he had left them at home. He knew this, nevertheless he continued to search, while the need of the drug rushed through him with a sense of physical sickness. He lost hold on the business of the House; unconsciously he half rose from his seat.

The man next him looked up. "Hold your ground, Chilcote," he said. "Rayforth is drying up."

With a wave of relief Chilcote dropped back into his place. Whatever the confusion in his mind, it was evidently not obvious in his face.

Rayforth resumed his seat, there was the usual slight stir and pause, then Salett, the member for Salchester, rose.

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With Salett's first words Chilcote's hand again sought his pocket, and again his eyes strayed towards the doors, but Fraide's erect head and stiff back just in front of him held him quiet. With an effort he pulled out his notes and smoothed them nervously; but though his gaze was fixed on the pages, not a line of Blessington's clear writing reached his mind. He glanced at the face of the Speaker, then at the faces on the Treasury Bench, then once more he leaned back in his seat.

The man beside him saw the movement. "Funking the dry-dock?" he whispered, jestingly.

"No"—Chilcote turned to him suddenly—"but I feel beastly—have felt beastly for weeks."

The other looked at him more closely. "Anything wrong?" he asked. It was a novel experience to be confided in by Chilcote.

"Oh, it's the grind—the infernal grind." As he said it, it seemed to him suddenly that his strength gave way. He forgot his companion, his position, everything except the urgent instinct that filled mind and body. Scarcely knowing what he did, he rose and leaned forward to whisper in Fraide's ear.

Fraide was seen to turn, his thin face interested and concerned, then he was seen to nod once or twice in acquiescence, and a moment later Chilcote stepped quietly out of his place.

One or two men spoke to him as he hurried from the House, but he shook them off almost uncivilly, and, making for the nearest exit, hailed a cab.

The drive to Grosvenor Square was a misery. Time after time he changed from one corner of the cab to the other, his acute internal pains prolonged by every de-

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lay and increased by every motion. At last, weak in all his limbs, he stepped from the vehicle at his own door.

Entering the house, he instantly mounted the stairs and passed to his own rooms. Opening the bedroom door, he peered in cautiously, then pushed the door wide. The light had been switched on, but the room was empty. With a nervous excitement scarcely to be kept in check, he entered, shut and locked the door, then moved to the wardrobe, and, opening it, drew the tube of tabloids from the shelf.

His hand shook violently as he carried the tube to the table. The strain of the day, the anxiety of the past hours, with their final failure, had found sudden expression. Mixing a larger dose than any he had before allowed himself, he swallowed it hastily, and, walking across the room, threw himself, fully dressed, upon the bed.

IV

TO those whose sphere lies in the west of London, Fleet Street is little more than a name, and Clifford's Inn a mere dead letter. Yet Clifford's Inn lies as safely stowed away in the shadow of the Law Courts as any grave under a country church wall; it is as green of grass, as gray of stone, as irresponsible to the passing footstep.

Facing the railed-in grass-plot of its little court stood the house in which John Loder had his rooms. Taken at a first glance, the house had the deserted air of an office, inhabited only in the early hours; but, as night fell, lights would be seen to show out, first on one floor, then on another — faint, human beacons unconsciously signalling each other. The rooms Loder inhabited were on the highest floor; and from their windows one might gaze philosophically on the tree-tops, forgetting the uneven pavement and the worn railing that hemmed them round. In the landing outside the rooms his name appeared above his door, but the paint had been soiled by time, and the letters for the most part reduced to shadows; so that, taken in conjunction with the gaunt staircase and bare walls, the place had a cheerless look.

Inside, however, the effect was somewhat mitigated. The room on the right hand, as one entered the small passage that served as hall, was of fair size, though low-