VIII

TO all men come portentous moments, difficult moments, triumphant moments. Loder had had his examples of all three, but no moment in his career ever equalled in strangeness of sensation that in which, dressed in another man's clothes, he fitted the latch-key for the first time into the door of the other man's house.

The act was quietly done. The key fitted the lock smoothly and his fingers turned it without hesitation, though his heart, usually extremely steady, beat sharply for a second. The hall loomed massive and sombre despite the modernity of electric lights. It was darkly and expensively decorated in black and brown; a frieze of wrought bronze, representing peacocks with outspread tails, ornamented the walls; the banisters were of heavy iron-work, and the somewhat formidable fireplace was of the same dark metal.

Loder looked about him, then advanced, his heart again beating quickly as his hand touched the cold banister and he began his ascent of the stairs. But at each step his confidence strengthened, his feet became more firm; until, at the head of the stairs, as if to disprove his assurance, his pulses played him false once more, this time to a more serious tune. From the farther end of a well-lighted corridor a maid was coming straight in his direction.

For one short second all things seemed to whiz about him; the certainty of detection overpowered his mind. The indisputable knowledge that he was John Loder and no other, despite all armor of effrontery and dress, so dominated him that all other considerations shrank before it. It wanted but one word, one simple word of denunciation, and the whole scheme was shattered. In the dismay of the moment, he almost wished that the word might be spoken and the suspense ended.

But the maid came on in silence, and so incredible was the silence that Loder moved onward, too. He came within a yard of her, and still she did not speak; then, as he passed her, she drew back respectfully against the wall.

The strain, so astonishingly short, had been immense, but with its slackening came a strong reaction. The expected humiliation seethed suddenly to a desire to dare fate. Pausing quickly, he turned and called the woman back.

The spot where he had halted was vividly bright, the ceiling light being directly above his head; and as she came towards him he raised his face deliberately and waited.

She looked at him without surprise or interest. "Yes, sir?" she said.

"Is your mistress in?" he asked. He could think of no other question, but it served his purpose as a test of his voice.

Still the woman showed no surprise. "She's not in sir," she answered. "But she's expected in half an hour."

"In half an hour? All right! That's all I wanted." With a movement of decision Loder walked back to

the stair-head, turned to the right, and opened the door of Chilcote's rooms.

The door opened on a short, wide passage; on one side stood the study, on the other the bed, bath, and dressing-rooms. With a blind sense of knowledge and unfamiliarity, bred of much description on Chilcote's part, he put his hand on the study door and, still exalted by the omen of his first success, turned the handle.

Inside the room there was firelight and lamplight and a studious air of peace. The realization of this and a slow incredulity at Chilcote's voluntary renunciation were his first impressions; then his attention was needed for more imminent things.

As he entered, the new secretary was returning a volume to its place on the book-shelves. At sight of him, he pushed it hastily into position and turned round.

"I was making a few notes on the political position of Khorasan," he said, glancing with slight apprehensiveness at the other's face. He was a small, shy man, with few social attainments but an extraordinary amount of learning—the antithesis of the alert Blessington, whom he had replaced.

Loder bore his scrutiny without flinching. Indeed, it struck him suddenly that there was a fund of interest, almost of excitement, in the encountering of each new pair of eyes. At the thought he moved forward to the desk.

"Thank you, Greening," he said. "A very useful bit of work."

The secretary glanced up, slightly puzzled. His endurance had been severely taxed in the fourteen days that he had filled his new post.

"I'm glad you think so, sir," he said, hesitatingly.

"You rather pooh-poohed the matter this morning, if you remember."

Loder was taking off his coat, but stopped in the operation.

"This morning?" he said. "Oh, did I? Did I?" Then, struck by the opportunity the words gave him, he turned towards the secretary. "You've got to get used to me, Greening," he said. "You haven't quite grasped me yet, I can see. I'm a man of moods, you know. Up to the present you've seen my slack side, my jarred side, but I have quite another when I care to show it. I'm a sort of Jekyll-and-Hyde affair." Again he laughed, and Greening echoed the sound diffidently. Chilcote had evidently discouraged familiarity.

Loder eyed him with abrupt understanding. He recognized the loneliness in the anxious, conciliatory manner.

"You're tired," he said, kindly. "Go to bed. I've got some thinking to do. Good-night." He held out his hand.

Greening took it, still half distrustful of this fresh side to so complex a man.

"Good-night, sir," he said. "To-morrow, if you approve, I shall go on with my notes. I hope you will have a restful night."

For a second Loder's eyebrows went up, but he recovered himself instantly.

"Ah, thanks, Greening," he said. "Thanks. I think your hope will be fulfilled."

He watched the little secretary move softly and apologetically to the door; then he walked to the fire, and, resting his elbows on the mantel-piece, he took his face in his hands.

For a space he stood absolutely quiet, then his hands dropped to his sides and he turned slowly round. In that short space he had balanced things and found his bearings. The slight nervousness shown in his brusque sentences and overconfident manner faded out, and he faced facts steadily.

With the return of his calmness he took a long survey of the room. His glance brightened appreciatively as it travelled from the walls lined with well-bound books to the lamps modulated to the proper light; from the lamps to the desk fitted with every requirement. Nothing was lacking. All he had once possessed, all he had since dreamed of, was here, but on a greater scale. To enjoy the luxuries of life a man must go long without them. Loder had lived severely —so severely that until three weeks ago he had believed himself exempt from the temptations of humanity. Then the voice of the world had spoken, and within him another voice had answered, with a tone so clamorous and insistent that it had outcried his surprised and incredulous wonder at its existence and its claims. That had been the voice of suppressed ambition; and now as he stood in the new atmosphere a newer voice lifted itself. The joy of material things rose suddenly, overbalancing the last remnant of the philosophy he had reared. He saw all things in a fresh light—the soft carpets, the soft lights, the numberless pleasant, unnecessary things that color the passing landscape and oil the wheels of life. This was power—power made manifest. The choice bindings of one's books, the quiet harmony of one's surroundings, the gratifying deference of one's dependants—these were the visible, the outward signs, the things he had forgotten.

Crossing the room slowly, he lifted and looked at the different papers on the desk. They had a substantial feeling, an importance, an air of value. They were like the solemn keys to so many vexed problems. Beside the papers were a heap of letters neatly arranged and as yet unopened. He turned them over one by one. They were all thick, and interesting to look at. He smiled as he recalled his own scanty mail: envelopes long and bulky or narrow and thin—unwelcome manuscripts or very welcome checks. Having sorted the letters, he hesitated. It was his task to open them, but he had never in his life opened an envelope addressed to another man.

He stood uncertain, weighing them in his hand. Then all at once a look of attention and surprise crossed his face, and he raised his head. Some one had unmistakably paused outside the door which Greening had left ajar.

There was a moment of apparent doubt, then a stir of skirts, a quick, uncertain knock, and the intruder entered.

For a couple of seconds she stood in the doorway; then, as Loder made no effort to speak, she moved into the room. She had apparently but just returned from some entertainment, for, though she had drawn off her long gloves, she was still wearing an evening cloak of lace and fur.

That she was Chilcote's wife Loder instinctively realized the moment she entered the room. But a disconcerting confusion of ideas was all that followed the knowledge. He stood by the desk, silent and awkward, trying to fit his expectations to his knowledge. Then, faced by the hopelessness of the task, he turned abruptly and looked at her again.

She had taken off her cloak and was standing by the fire. The compulsion of moving through life alone had set its seal upon her in a certain self-possession, a certain confidence of pose; yet her figure, as Loder then saw it, backgrounded by the dark books and gowned in pale blue, had a suggestion of youthfulness that seemed a contradiction. The remembrance of Chilcote's epithets "cold" and "unsympathetic" came back to him with something like astonishment. He felt no uncertainty, no dread of discovery and humiliation in her presence as he had felt in the maid's; yet there was something in her face that made him infinitely more uncomfortable. A look he could find no name for—a friendliness that studiously covered another feeling, whether question, distrust, or actual dislike he could not say. With a strange sensation of awkwardness he sorted Chilcote's letters, waiting for her to speak.

As if divining his thought, she turned towards him. "I'm afraid I rather intrude," she said. "If you are busy—"

His sense of courtesy was touched; he had begun life with a high opinion of women, and the words shook up an echo of the old sentiment.

"Don't think that," he said, hastily. "I was only looking through—my letters. You mustn't rate yourself below letters." He was conscious that his tone was hurried, that his words were a little jagged; but Eve did not appear to notice. Unlike Greening, she took the new manner without surprise. She had known Chilcote for six years.

"I dined with the Fraides to-night," she said. "Mr. Fraide sent you a message."

Unconsciously Loder smiled. There was humor in the thought of a message to him from the great Fraide. To hide his amusement he wheeled one of the big lounge-chairs forward.

"Indeed," he said. "Won't you sit down?"

They were near together now, and he saw her face more fully. Again he was taken aback. Chilcote had spoken of her as successful and intelligent, but never as beautiful. Yet her beauty was a rare and uncommon fact. Her hair was black—not a glossy black, but the dusky black that is softer than any brown; her eyes were large and of a peculiarly pure blue; and her eyelashes were black, beautifully curved and of remarkable thickness.

"Won't you sit down?" he said again, cutting short his thoughts with some confusion.

"Thank you." She gravely accepted the proffered chair. But he saw that without any ostentation she drew her skirts aside as she passed him. The action displeased him unaccountably.

"Well," he said, shortly, "what had Fraide to say?" He walked to the mantel-piece with his customary movement and stood watching her. The instinct towards hiding his face had left him. Her instant and uninterested acceptance of him almost nettled him; his own half-contemptuous impression of Chilcote came to him unpleasantly, and with it the first desire to assert his own individuality. Stung by the conflicting emotions, he felt in Chilcote's pockets for something to smoke.

Eve saw and interpreted the action. "Are these your cigarettes?" She leaned towards a small table and took up a box made of lizard-skin.

"Thanks." He took the box from her, and as it passed from one to the other he saw her glance at his rings. The glance was momentary; her lips parted to express question or surprise, then closed again without comment. More than any spoken words, the incident showed him the gulf that separated husband and wife.

"Well?" he said again, "what about Fraide?"

At his words she sat straighter and looked at him more directly, as if bracing herself to a task.

"Mr. Fraide is—is as interested as ever in you," she began.

"Or in you?" Loder made the interruption precisely as he felt Chilcote would have made it. Then instantly he wished the words back.

Eve's warm skin colored more deeply; for a second the inscrutable underlying expression that puzzled him showed in her eyes, then she sank back into a corner of the chair.

"Why do you make such a point of sneering at my friends?" she asked, quietly. "I overlook it when you are—nervous." She halted slightly on the word. "But you are not nervous to-night."

Loder, to his great humiliation, reddened. Except for an occasional outburst on the part of Mrs Robins, his charwoman, he had not merited a woman's displeasure for years.

"The sneer was unintentional," he said.

For the first time Eve showed a personal interest. She looked at him in a puzzled way. "If your apology was meant," she said, hesitatingly, "I should be glad to accept it."

Loder, uncertain of how to take the words, moved

back to the desk. He carried an unlighted cigarette between his fingers.

There was an interval in which neither spoke. Then, at last, conscious of its awkwardness, Eve rose. With one hand on the back of her chair, she looked at him.

"Mr. Fraide thinks it's such a pity that"—she stopped to choose her words—"that you should lose hold on things—lose interest in things, as you are doing. He has been thinking a good deal about you in the last three weeks—ever since the day of your—your illness in the House; and it seems to him"—again she broke off, watching Loder's averted head—"it seems to him that if you made one real effort now, even now, to shake off your restlessness, that your—your health might improve. He thinks that the present crisis would be"—she hesitated—"would give you a tremendous opportunity. Your trade interests, bound up as they are with Persia, would give any opinion you might hold a double weight." Almost unconsciously a touch of warmth crept into her words.

"Mr. Fraide talked very seriously about the beginning of your career. He said that if only the spirit of your first days could come back—" Her tone grew quicker, as though she feared ridicule in Loder's silence. "He asked me to use my influence. I know that I have little—none, perhaps—but I couldn't tell him that, and so—so I promised."

"And have kept the promise?" Loder spoke at random. Her manner and her words had both affected him. There was a sensation of unreality in his brain.

"Yes," she answered. "I always want to do—what I can."

As she spoke a sudden realization of the effort she was making struck upon him, and with it his scorn of Chilcote rose in renewed force.

"My intention—" he began, turning to her. Then the futility of any declaration silenced him. "I shall think over what you say," he added, after a minute's wait. "I suppose I can't say more than that."

Their eyes met and she smiled a little.

"I don't believe I expected as much," she said. "I think I'll go now. You have been wonderfully patient." Again she smiled slightly, at the same time extending her hand. The gesture was quite friendly, but in Loder's eyes it held relief as well as friendliness; and when their hands met he noticed that her fingers barely brushed his.

He picked up her cloak and carried it across the room. As he held the door open, he laid it quietly across her arm.

"I'll think over what you've said," he repeated.

Again she glanced at him as if suspecting sarcasm; then, partly reassured, she paused. "You will always despise your opportunities, and I suppose I shall always envy them," she said. "That's the way with men and women. Good-night!" With another faint smile she passed out into the corridor.

Loder waited until he heard the outer door close, then he crossed the room thoughtfully and dropped into the chair that she had vacated. He sat for a time looking at the hand her fingers had touched; then he lifted his head with a characteristic movement.

"By Jove!" he said, aloud, "how cordially she detests him!"

IX

LODER slept soundly and dreamlessly in Chilcote's canopied bed. To him the big room with its severe magnificence suggested nothing of the gloom and solitude that it held in its owner's eyes. The ponderous furniture, the high ceiling, the heavy curtains, unchanged since the days of Chilcote's grandfather, all hinted at a far-reaching ownership that stirred him. The ownership was mythical in his regard, and the possessions a mirage, but they filled the day. And, surely, sufficient for the day—

That was his frame of mind as he opened his eyes on the following morning, and lay appreciative of his comfort, of the surrounding space, even of the light that filtered through the curtain chinks, suggestive of a world recreated. With day, all things seem possible to a healthy man. He stretched his arms luxuriously, delighting in the glossy smoothness of the sheets.

What was it Chilcote had said? Better live for a day than exist for a lifetime! That was true; and life had begun. At thirty-six he was to know it for the first time.

He smiled, but without irony. Man is at his best at thirty-six, he mused. He has retained his enthusiasms and shed his exuberances; he has learned what to pick up and what to pass by; he no longer imagines that to drain a cup one must taste the dregs. He closed