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THE best moments of a man's life are the moments when, strong in himself, he feels that the world lies before him. Gratified ambition may be the summer, but anticipation is the ardent spring-time of a man's career.

As Loder drove that night from Fleet Street to Grosvenor Square he realized this—though scarcely with any degree of consciousness—for he was no accomplished self-analyst. But in a wave of feeling too vigorous to be denied he recognized his regained foothold—the step that lifted him at once from the pit to the pinnacle.

In that moment of realization he looked neither backward nor forward. The present was all-sufficing. Difficulties might loom ahead, but difficulties had but one object—the testing and sharpening of a man's strength. In the first deep surge of egotistical feeling he almost rejoiced in Chilcote's weakness. The more Chilcote tangled the threads of his life, the stronger must be the fingers that unravelled them. He was possessed by a great impatience; the joy of action was stirring in his blood.

Leaving the cab, he walked confidently to the door of Chilcote's house and inserted the latch-key. Even in this small act there was a grain of individual satisfaction. Then very quietly he opened the door and crossed the hall.

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As he entered, a footman was arranging the fire that burned in the big grate. Seeing the man, he halted.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked, in unconscious repetition of his first question in the same house.

The man looked up. "She has just finished dinner, sir. She dined alone in her own room." He glanced at Loder in the quick, uncertain way that was noticeable in all the servants of the household when they addressed their master. Loder saw the look and wondered what depth of curiosity it betrayed, how much of insight into the domestic life that he must always be content to skim. For an instant the old resentment against Chilcote tinged his exaltation, but he swept it angrily aside. Without further remark he began to mount the stairs.

Gaining the landing, he did not turn as usual to the door that shut off Chilcote's rooms, but moved onward down the corridor towards Eve's private sitting-room. He moved slowly till the door was reached; then he paused and lifted his hand. There was a moment's wait while his fingers rested on the handle; then a sensation he could not explain—a reticence, a reluctance to intrude upon this one precinct—caused his fingers to relax. With a slightly embarrassed gesture he drew back slowly and retraced his steps.

Once in Chilcote's bedroom, he walked to the nearest bell and pressed it. Renwick responded, and at sight of him Loder's feelings warmed with the same sense of fitness and familiarity that the great bed and sombre furniture of the room had inspired.

But the man did not come forward as he had expected. He remained close to the door with a hesitation that was unusual in a trained servant. It struck Loder

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that possibly his stolidity had exasperated Chilcote, and that possibly Chilcote had been at no pains to conceal the exasperation. The idea caused him to smile involuntarily.

"Come into the room, Renwick," he said. "It's uncomfortable to see you standing there. I want to know if Mrs. Chilcote has sent me any message about to-night."

Renwick studied him furtively as he came forward. "Yes, sir," he said. "Mrs. Chilcote's maid said that the carriage was ordered for ten-fifteen, and she hoped that would suit you." He spoke reluctantly, as if expecting a rebuke.

At the opening sentence Loder had turned aside, but now, as the man finished, he wheeled round again and looked at him closely with his keen, observant eyes.

"Look here," he said. "I can't have you speak to me like that. I may come down on you rather sharply when my—my nerves are bad; but when I'm myself I treat you—well, I treat you decently, at any rate. You'll have to learn to discriminate. Look at me now!" A thrill of risk and of rulership passed through him as he spoke. "Look at me now! Do I look as I looked this morning—or yesterday?"

The man eyed him half stupidly, half timidly.

"Well?" Loder insisted.

"Well, sir," Renwick responded, with some slowness, "you look the same—and you look different. A healthier color, perhaps, sir—and the eye clearer." He grew more confident under Loder's half-humorous, half-insistent gaze. "Now that I look closer, sir—"

Loder laughed. "That's it!" he said. "Now that you look closer. You'll have to grow observant;

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observation is an excellent quality in a servant. When you come into a room in future, look first of all at me—and take your cue from that. Remember that serving a man with nerves is like serving two masters. Now you can go; and tell Mrs. Chilcote's maid that I shall be quite ready at a quarter-past ten."

"Yes, sir. And after that?"

"Nothing further. I sha'n't want you again to-night." He turned away as he spoke, and moved towards the great fire that was always kept alight in Chilcote's room. But as the man moved towards the door he wheeled back again. "Oh, one thing more, Renwick! Bring me some sandwiches and a whiskey." He remembered for the first time that he had eaten nothing since early afternoon.

At a few minutes after ten Loder left Chilcote's room, resolutely descended the stairs, and took up his position in the hall. Resolution is a strong word to apply to such a proceeding, but something in his bearing, in the attitude of his shoulders and head, instinctively suggested it.

Five or six minutes passed, but he waited without impatience; then at last the sound of a carriage stopping before the house caused him to lift his head, and at the same instant Eve appeared at the head of the staircase.

She stood there for a second, looking down on him, her maid a pace or two behind, holding her cloak. The picture she made struck upon his mind with something of a revelation.

On his first sight of her she had appealed to him as a strange blending of youth and self-possession—a girl

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with a woman's clearer perception of life; later, he had been drawn to study her in other aspects—as a possible comrade and friend; now for the first time he saw her as a power in her own world, a woman to whom no man could deny consideration. She looked taller for the distance between them, and the distinction of her carriage added to the effect. Her black gown was exquisitely soft—as soft as her black hair; above her forehead was a cluster of splendid diamonds shaped like a coronet, and a band of the same stones encircled her neck. Loder realized in a glance that only the most distinguished of women could wear such ornaments and not have her beauty eclipsed. With a touch of the old awkwardness that had before assailed him in her presence, he came slowly forward as she descended the stairs.

“Can I help you with your cloak?” he asked. And as he asked it, something like surprise at his own timidity crossed his mind.

For a second Eve's glance rested on his face. Her expression was quite impassive, but as she lowered her lashes a faint gleam flickered across her eyes; nevertheless, her answer, when it came, was studiously courteous.

“Thank you,” she said, “but Marie will do all I want.”

Loder looked at her for a moment, then turned aside. He was not hurt by his rebuff; rather, by an interesting sequence of impressions, he was stirred by it. The pride that had refused Chilcote's help, and the self-control that had refused it graciously, moved him to admiration. He understood and appreciated both by the light of personal experience.

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“The carriage is waiting, sir,” Crapham's voice broke in.

Loder nodded, and Eve turned to her maid. “That will do, Marie,” she said. “I shall want a cup of chocolate when I get back—probably at one o'clock.” She drew her cloak about her shoulders and moved towards the door. Then she paused and looked back. “Shall we start?” she asked, quietly.

Loder, still watching her, came forward at once. “Certainly,” he said, with unusual gentleness.

He followed her as she crossed the footpath, but made no further offer of help; and when the moment came he quietly took his place beside her in the carriage. His last impression, as the horses wheeled round, was of the open hall door—Crapham in his sombre livery and the maid in her black dress, both silhouetted against the dark background of the hall; then, as the carriage moved forward smoothly and rapidly, he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

During the first few moments of the drive there was silence. To Loder there was a strange, new sensation in this companionship, so close and yet so distant. He was so near to Eve that the slight fragrant scent from her clothes might almost have belonged to his own. The impression was confusing yet vaguely delightful. It was years since he had been so close to a woman of his own class—his own caste. He acknowledged the thought with a curious sense of pleasure. Involuntarily he turned and looked at her.

She was sitting very straight, her fine profile cut clear against the carriage window, her diamonds quivering in the light that flashed by them from the street. For a space the sense of unreality that had pervaded

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his first entrance into Chilcote's life touched him again, then another and more potent feeling rose to quell it. Almost involuntarily as he looked at her his lips parted.

"May I say something?" he asked.

Eve remained motionless. She did not turn her head, as most women would have done. "Say anything you like," she said, gravely.

"Anything?" He bent a little nearer, filled again by the inordinate wish to dominate.

"Of course."

It seemed to him that her voice sounded forced and a little tired. For a moment he looked through the window at the passing lights; then slowly his gaze returned to her face.

"You look very beautiful to-night," he said. His voice was low and his manner unemotional, but his words had the effect he desired.

She turned her head, and her eyes met his in a glance of curiosity and surprise.

Slight as the triumph was, it thrilled him. The small scene with Chilcote's valet came back to him; his own personality moved him again to a reckless determination to make his own voice heard. Leaning forward, he laid his hand lightly on her arm.

"Eve," he said, quickly—"Eve, do you remember—" Then he paused and withdrew his hand. The horses had slackened speed, then stopped altogether as the carriage fell into line outside Bramfell House.

XIV

LODER entered Lady Bramfell's feeling far more like an actor in a drama than an ordinary man in a peculiar situation. It was the first time he had played Chilcote to a purely social audience, and the first time for many years that he had rubbed shoulders with a well-dressed crowd ostensibly brought together for amusement. As he followed Eve along the corridor that led to the reception-rooms he questioned the reality of the position again and again; then abruptly, at the moment when the sensation of unfamiliarity was strongest, a cheery voice hailed him, and, turning, he saw the square shoulders, light eyes, and pointed moustache of Lakeley, the owner of the *St. George's Gazette*.

At the sight of the man and the sound of his greeting his doubts and speculations vanished. The essentials of life rose again to the position they had occupied three weeks ago, in the short but strenuous period when his dormant activities had been stirred and he had recognized his true self. He lifted his head unconsciously, the shade of misgiving that had crossed his confidence passing from him as he smiled at Lakeley with a keen, alert pleasure that altered his whole face.

Eve, looking back, saw the expression. It attracted and held her, like a sudden glimpse into a secret room. In all the years of her marriage, in the months of her courtship even, she had never surprised the look on