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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

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Chilcote's face. The impression came quickly, and with it a strange, warm rush of interest that receded slowly, leaving an odd sense of loneliness. But, at the moment that the feeling came and passed, her attention was claimed in another direction. A slight, fair-haired boy forced his way towards her through the press of people that filled the corridor.

"Mrs. Chilcote!" he exclaimed. "Can I believe my luck in finding you alone?"

Eve laughed. It seemed that there was relief in her laugh. "How absurd you are, Bobby!" she said, kindly. "But you are wrong. My husband is here—I am waiting for him."

Blessington looked round. "Oh!" he said. "Indeed!" Then he relapsed into silence. He was the soul of good-nature, but those who knew him best knew that Chilcote's summary change of secretaries had rankled. Eve, conscious of the little jar, made haste to smooth it away.

"Tell me about yourself," she said. "What have you been doing?"

Blessington looked at her, then smiled again, his buoyancy restored. "Doing?" he said. "Oh, calling every other afternoon at Grosvenor Square—only to find that a certain lady is never at home."

At his tone Eve laughed again. The boy, with his frank and ingenuous nature, had beguiled many a dull hour for her in past days, and she had missed him not a little when his place had been filled by Greening.

"But I mean seriously, Bobby. Has something good turned up?"

Blessington made a wry face. "Something is on its way—that's why I am on duty to-night. Old Bram-

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fell and the pater are working it between them. So if Lady Bramfell or Lady Astrupp happen to drop a fan or a handkerchief this evening, I've got to be here to pick it up. See?"

"As you picked up my fans and handkerchiefs last year—and the year before?" Eve smiled.

Blessington's face suddenly looked grave. "I wish you hadn't said that," he said. Then he paused abruptly. Out of the hum of talk behind them a man's laugh sounded. It was not loud, but it was a laugh that one seldom hears in a London drawing-room—it expressed interest, amusement, and in an inexplicable way it seemed also to express strength.

Eve and Blessington both turned involuntarily.

"By Jove!" said Blessington

Eve said nothing.

Loder was parting with Lakely, and his was the laugh that had attracted them both. The interest excited by his talk was still reflected in his face and bearing as he made his way towards them.

"By Jove!" said Blessington again. "I never realized that Chilcote was so tall."

Again Eve said nothing. But silently and with a more subtle meaning she found herself echoing the words.

Until he was quite close to her, Loder did not seem to see her. Then he stopped quietly.

"I was speaking to Lakely," he said. "He wants me to dine with him one night at Cadogan Gardens."

But Eve was silent, waiting for him to address Blessington. She glanced at him quickly, but though their eyes met he did not catch the meaning that lay in hers. It was a difficult moment. She had known

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him incredibly, almost unpardonably, absent-minded, but it had invariably been when he was suffering from "nerves," as she phrased it to herself. But to-night he was obviously in the possession of unclouded faculties. She colored slightly and glanced under her lashes at Blessington. Had the same idea struck him, she wondered? But he was studiously studying a suit of Chinese armor that stood close by in a niche of the wall.

"Bobby has been keeping me amused while you talked to Mr. Lakely," she said, pointedly.

Directly addressed, Loder turned and looked at Blessington. "How d'you do?" he said, with doubtful cordiality. The name of Bobby conveyed nothing to him.

To his surprise, Eve looked annoyed, and Blessington's fresh-colored face deepened in tone. With a slow, uncomfortable sensation he was aware of having struck a wrong note.

There was a short, unpleasant pause. Then, more by intuition than actual sight, Blessington saw Eve's eyes turn from him to Loder, and with quick tact he saved the situation.

"How d'you do, sir?" he responded, with a smile. "I congratulate you on looking so—so uncommon well. I was just telling Mrs. Chilcote that I hold a commission for Lady Astrupp to-night. I'm a sort of scout at present—reporting on the outposts." He spoke fast and without much meaning, but his boyish voice eased the strain.

Eve thanked him with a smile. "Then we mustn't interfere with a person on active service," she said. "Besides, we have our own duties to get through."

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She smiled again, and, touching Loder's arm, indicated the reception-rooms.

When they entered the larger of the two rooms Lady Bramfell was still receiving her guests. She was a tall and angular woman, who, except for a certain beauty of hands and feet and a certain similarity of voice, possessed nothing in common with her sister Lillian. She was speaking to a group of people as they approached, and the first sound of her sweet and rather drawling tones touched Loder with a curious momentary feeling—a vague suggestion of awakened memories. Then the suggestion vanished as she turned and greeted Eve.

"How sweet of you to come!" she murmured. And it seemed to Loder that a more spontaneous smile lighted up her face. Then she extended her hand to him. "And you, too!" she added. "Though I fear we shall bore you dreadfully."

Watching her with interest, he saw the change of expression as her eyes turned from Eve to him, and noticed a colder tone in her voice as she addressed him directly. The observation moved him to self-assertion.

"That's a poor compliment to me," he said. "To be bored is surely only a polite way of being inane."

Lady Bramfell smiled. "What!" she exclaimed. "You defending your social reputation?"

Loder laughed a little. "The smaller it is, the more defending it needs," he replied.

Another stream of arrivals swept by them as he spoke; Eve smiled at their hostess and moved across the room, and he perforce followed. As he gained her side, the little court about Lady Bramfell was left well in the rear, the great throng at the farther end of the

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room was not yet reached, and for the moment they were practically alone.

There was a certain uneasiness in that moment of companionship. It seemed to him that Eve wished to speak, but hesitated. Once or twice she opened and closed the fan that she was carrying, then at last, as if by an effort, she turned and looked at him.

"Why were you so cold to Bobby Blessington?" she asked. "Doesn't it seem discourteous to ignore him as you did?"

Her manner was subdued. It was not the annoyed manner that one uses to a man when he has behaved ill; it was the explanatory tone one might adopt towards an incorrigible child. Loder felt this; but the gist of a remark always came to him first, its mode of expression later. The fact that it was Blessington whom he had encountered—Blessington to whom he had spoken with vague politeness—came to him with a sense of unpleasantness. He was not to blame in the matter, nevertheless he blamed himself. He was annoyed that he should have made the slip in Eve's presence.

They were moving forward, nearing the press of people in the second room, when Eve spoke, and the fact filled him with an added sense of annoyance. People smiled and bowed to her from every side; one woman leaned forward as they passed and whispered something in her ear. Again the sensation of futility and vexation filled him; again he realized how palpable was the place she held in the world. Then, as his feelings reached their height and speech seemed forced upon him, a small man with a round face, catching a glimpse of Eve, darted from a circle of people gathered in one of the windows and came quickly towards them.

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With an unjust touch of irritation he recognized Lord Bramfell.

Again the sense of Eve's aloofness stung him as their host approached. In another moment she would be lost to him among this throng of strangers—claimed by them as by right.

"Eve—" he said, involuntarily and under his breath.

She half paused and turned towards him. "Yes?" she said; and he wondered if it was his imagination that made the word sound slightly eager.

"About that matter of Blessington—" he began. Then he stopped. Bramfell had reached them.

The little man came up smiling and with an outstretched hand. "There's no penalty for separating husband and wife, is there, Mrs. Chilcote? How are you, Chilcote?" He turned from one to the other with the quick, noiseless manner that always characterized him.

Loder turned aside to hide his vexation, but Eve greeted their host with her usual self-possessed smile.

"You are exempt from all penalties to-night," she said. Then she turned to greet the members of his party who had strolled across from the window in his wake.

As she moved aside Bramfell looked at Loder. "Well, Chilcote, have you dipped into the future yet?" he asked, with a laugh.

Loder echoed the laugh but said nothing. In his uncertainty at the question he reverted to his old resource of silence.

Bramfell raised his eyebrows. "What!" he said. "Don't tell me that my sister-in-law hasn't engaged you as a victim." Then he turned in Eve's direc-

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tion. "You've heard of our new departure, Mrs. Chilcote?"

Eve looked round from the lively group by which she was surrounded. "Lillian's crystal-gazing? Why, of course!" she said. "She should make a very beautiful seer. We are all quite curious."

Bramfell pursed up his lips. "She has a very beautiful tent at the end of the conservatory. It took five men as many days to rig it up. We couldn't hear ourselves talk, for hammering. My wife said it made her feel quite philanthropic, it reminded her so much of a charity bazaar."

Everybody laughed; and at the same moment Blessington came quickly across the room and joined the group.

"Hallo!" he said. "Anybody seen Witcheston? He's next on my list for the crystal business."

Again the whole party laughed, and Bramfell, stepping forward, touched Blessington's arm in mock seriousness.

"Witcheston is playing bridge, like a sensible man," he said. "Leave him in peace, Bobby."

Blessington made a comical grimace. "But I'm working this on commercial principles," he said. "I keep the list, names and hours complete, and Lady Astrupp gazes, in blissful ignorance as to who her victims are. The whole thing is great—simple and statistical."

"For goodness' sake, Bobby, shut up!" Bramfell's round eyes were twinkling with amusement.

"But my system—"

"Systems! Ah, we all had them when we were as young as you are!"

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"And they all had flaws, Bobby," Eve broke in. "We were always finding gaps that had to be filled up. Never mind about Lord Witcheston. Get a substitute; it won't count—if Lillian doesn't know."

Blessington wavered as she spoke. His eyes wandered round the party and again rested on Bramfell.

"Not me, Bobby! Remember, I've breathed crystals—practically lived on them—for the last week. Now, there's Chilcote—" Again his eyes twinkled.

All eyes were turned on Loder, though one or two strayed surreptitiously to Eve. She, seeming sensitive to the position, laughed quickly.

"A very good idea!" she said. "Who wants to see the future, if not a politician?"

Loder glanced from her to Blessington. Then, with a very feminine impulse, she settled the matter beyond dispute.

"Please use your authority, Bobby," she said. "And when you've got him safely under canvas, come back to me. It's years since we've had a talk." She nodded and smiled, then instantly turned to Bramfell with some trivial remark.

For a second Loder waited, then with a movement of resignation he laid his hand on Blessington's arm. "Very well!" he said. "But if my fate is black, witness it was my wife who sent me to it." His faint pause on the word wife, the mention of the word itself in the presence of these people, had a savor of recklessness. The small discomfiture of his earlier slip vanished before it; he experienced a strong reaction of confidence in his luck. With a cool head, a steady step, and a friendly pressure of the fingers on Blessington's arm, he allowed himself to be drawn across the recep-

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tion-rooms, through the long corridors, and down the broad flight of steps that led to the conservatory.

The conservatory was a feature of the Bramfell town-house, and to Loder it came as something wonderful and unlooked-for—with its clustering green branches, its slight, unoppressive scents, its temperately pleasant atmosphere. He felt no wish to speak as, still guided by Blessington, he passed down the shadowy paths that in the half-light had the warmth and mystery of a Southern garden. Here and there from the darkness came the whispering of a voice or the sound of a laugh, bringing with them the necessary touch of life. Otherwise the place was still.

Absorbed by the air of solitude, contrasting so remarkably with the noise and crowded glitter left behind in the reception-rooms, he had moved half-way down the long, green aisle before the business in hand came back to him with a sudden sense of annoyance. It seemed so paltry to mar the quiet of the place with the absurdity of a side-show. He turned to Blessington with a touch of abruptness.

"What am I expected to do?" he asked.

Blessington looked up, surprised. "Why, I thought, sir—" he began. Then he instantly altered his tone. "Oh, just enter into the spirit of the thing. Lady Astrupp won't put much strain on your credulity, but she'll make a big call on your solemnity." He laughed.

He had an infectious laugh, and Loder responded to it.

"But what am I to do?" he persisted.

"Oh, nothing. Being the priestess, she naturally demands acolytes; but she'll let you know that she holds the prior place. The tent is so fixed that she

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sees nothing beyond your hands; so there's absolutely no delusion." He laughed once more. Then suddenly he lowered his voice and slackened his steps. "Here we are!" he whispered, in pretended awe.

At the end of the path the space widened to the full breadth of the conservatory. The light was dimmer, giving an added impression of distance; away to the left, Loder heard the sound of splashing water, and on his right hand he caught his first glimpse of the tent that was his goal.

It was an artistic little structure—a pavilion formed of silky fabric that showed bronze in the light of an Oriental lamp that hung above its entrance. As they drew closer, a man emerged from it. He stood for a moment in uncertainty, looking about him; then, catching sight of them, he came forward laughing.

"By George!" he exclaimed, "it's as dark as limbo in there! I didn't see you at first. But I say, Blessington, it's a beastly shame to have that thunder-cloud barrier shutting off the sorceress. If she gazes at the crystal, mayn't we have something to gaze at, too?"

Blessington laughed. "You want too much, Galltry," he said. "Lady Astrupp understands the value of the unattainable. Come along, sir!" he added to Loder, drawing him forward with an energetic pressure of the arm.

Loder responded, and as he did so a flicker of curiosity touched his mind for the first time. He wondered for an instant who this woman was who aroused so much comment. And with the speculation came the remembrance of how she had assured Chilcote that on one point at least he was invulnerable. He had spoken then from the height of a past experience—an

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experience so fully passed that he wondered now if it had been as staple a guarantee as he had then believed. Man's capacity for outliving is astonishingly complete. The long-ago incident in the Italian mountains had faded, like a crayon study in which the tones have merged and gradually lost character. The past had paled before the present—as golden hair might pale before black. The simile came with apparent irrelevance. Then again Blessington pressed his arm.

"Now, sir!" he said, drawing away and lifting the curtain that hung before the entrance of the tent.

Loder looked at the amused, boyish face lighted by the hanging lamp, and smiled pleasantly; then, with a shrug of the shoulders, he entered the pavilion, and the curtain fell behind him.

XV

ON entering the pavilion, Loder's first feeling was almost total darkness. But as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, the feeling vanished and the absurdity of the position came to his mind.

The tent was small, heavily draped with silk and smelling of musk. It was divided into two sections by an immovable curtain that hung from the roof to within a few feet of the floor. The only furniture on Loder's side was one low chair, and the only light a faint radiance that, coming from the invisible half of the pavilion, spread across the floor in a pale band. For a short space he stood uncertain, then his hesitation was brought to an end.

"Please sit down," said a low, soft voice.

For a further moment he stood undecided. The voice sounded so unexpectedly near. In the quiet and darkness of the place it seemed to possess a disproportionate weight—almost the weight of a familiar thing. Then, with a sudden, unanalyzed touch of relief, he located the impression. It was the similarity to Lady Bramfell's sweet, slow tones that had stirred his mind. With a sense of satisfaction he drew the chair forward and sat down.

Then, for the first time, he saw that on the other side of the gauze partition, and below it by a few inches, was