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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

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a small table of polished wood, on which stood an open book, a crystal ball, and a gold dish filled with ink. These were arranged on the side of the table nearest to him, the farther side being out of his range of vision. An amused interest touched him as he made his position more comfortable. Whoever this woman was, she had an eye for stage management, she knew how to marshal her effects. He found himself waiting with some curiosity for the next injunction from behind the curtain.

"The art of crystal-gazing," began the sweet, slow voice after a pause, "is one of the oldest known arts." Loder sat forward. The thought of Lady Bramfell mingled disconcertingly with some other thought more distant and less easy to secure.

"To obtain the best results," went on the seer, "the subject lays his uncovered hands outspread upon a smooth surface." It was evident that the invisible priestess was reading from the open book, for when the word "surface" was reached there was a slight stir that indicated the changing of position; and when the voice came again it was in a different tone.

"Please lay your hands, palms downward, upon the table."

Loder smiled to himself in the darkness. He pictured Chilcote with his nerves and his impatience going through this ordeal; then in good-humored silence he leaned forward and obeyed the command. His hands rested on the smooth surface of the table in the bar of light from the unseen lamp.

There was a second in which the seer was silent; then he fancied that she raised her head.

"You must take off your rings," she said, smoothly.

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"Any metal interferes with the sympathetic current."

At any other time Loder would have laughed; but the request so casually and graciously made sent all possibility of irony far into the background. The thought of Chilcote and of the one flaw in their otherwise flawless scheme rose to his mind. Instinctively he half withdrew his hands.

"Where is the sympathetic current?" he asked, quietly. His thoughts were busy with the question of whether he would or would not be justified in beating an undignified retreat.

"Between you and me, of course," said the voice, softly. It sounded languid, but very rational. The idea of retreat seemed suddenly theatrical. In this world of low voices and shaded lights people never adopted extreme measures—no occasion made a scene practicable, or even allowable. He leaned back slowly, while he summed up the situation. If by any unlucky chance this woman knew Chilcote to have adopted jewelry and had seen the designs of his rings, the sight of his own scarred finger would suggest question and comment; if, on the other hand, he left the pavilion without excuse, or if, without apparent reason, he refused to remove the rings, he opened up a new difficulty—a fresh road to curiosity. It came upon him with unusual quickness—the obstacles to, and the need for, a speedy decision. He glanced round the tent, then unconsciously he straightened his shoulders. After all, he had stepped into a tight corner, but there was no need to cry out in squeezing his way back. Then he realized that the soft, ingratiating tones were sounding once more.

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"It's the passing of my hands over yours, while I look into the crystal, that sets up sympathy"—a slender hand moved swiftly into the light and picked up the ball—"and makes my eyes see the pictures in your mind. Now, will you please take off your rings?"

The very naturalness of the request disarmed him. It was a risk. But, as Chilcote had said, risk was the salt of life!

"I'm afraid you think me very troublesome." The voice came again, delicately low and conciliatory.

For a brief second Loder wondered uncertainly how long or how well Chilcote knew Lady Astrupp; then he dismissed the question. Chilcote had never mentioned her until to-night, and then casually as Lady Bramfell's sister. What a coward he was becoming in throwing the dice with Fate! Without further delay he drew off the rings, slipped them into his pocket, and replaced his hands on the smooth table-top.

Then, at the moment that he replaced them, a peculiar thing occurred.

From the farther side of the dark partition came the quick, rustling stir of a skirt, and the slight scrape of a chair pushed either backward or forward. Then there was silence.

Now, silence can suggest anything, from profound thought to imbecility; but in this case its suggestion was *nil*. That something had happened, that some change had taken place, was as patent to Loder as the darkness of the curtain or the band of light that crossed the floor, but what had occasioned it, or what it stood for, he made no attempt to decide. He sat bitinglly conscious of his hands spread open on the table under the scrutiny of eyes that were invisible to him—

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vividly aware of the awkwardness of his position. He felt with instinctive certainty that a new chord had been struck; but a man seldom acts on instinctive certainties. If the exposure of his hands had struck this fresh note, then any added action would but heighten the dilemma. He sat silent and motionless.

Whether his impassivity had any bearing on the moment he had no way of knowing; but no further movement came from behind the partition. Whatever the emotions that had caused the sharp swish of skirts and the sharp scrape of the chair, they had evidently subsided or been dominated by other feelings.

The next indication of life that came to him was the laying down of the crystal ball. It was laid back upon the table with a slight jerk that indicated a decision come to; and almost simultaneously the seer's voice came to him again. Her tone was lower now than it had been before, and its extreme ease seemed slightly shaken—whether by excitement, surprise, or curiosity, it was impossible to say.

"You will think it strange—" she began. "You will think—" Then she stopped.

There was a pause, as though she waited for some help, but Loder remained mute. In difficulty a silent tongue and a cool head are usually man's best weapons.

His silence was disconcerting. He heard her stir again.

"You will think it strange—" she began once more. Then quite suddenly she checked and controlled her voice. "You must forgive me for what I am going to say," she added, in a completely different tone, "but crystal-gazing is such an illusive thing. Directly you

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put your hands upon the table I felt that there would be no result; but I wouldn't admit the defeat. Women are such keen anglers that they can never acknowledge that any fish, however big, has slipped the hook." She laughed softly.

At the sound of the laugh Loder shifted his position for the first time. He could not have told why, but it struck him with a slight sense of confusion. A precipitate wish to rise and pass through the doorway into the wider spaces of the conservatory came to him, though he made no attempt to act upon it. He knew that, for some inexplicable reason, this woman behind the screen had lied to him—in the controlling of her speech, in her change of voice. There had been one moment in which an impulse or an emotion had almost found voice; then training, instinct, or it might have been diplomacy, had conquered, and the moment had passed. There was a riddle in the very atmosphere of the place—and he abominated riddles.

But Lady Astrupp was absorbed in her own concerns. Again she changed her position; and to Loder, listening attentively, it seemed that she leaned forward and examined his hands afresh. The sensation was so acute that he withdrew them involuntarily.

Again there was a confused rustle; the crystal ball rolled from the table, and the seer laughed quickly. Obeying a strenuous impulse, Loder rose.

He had no definite notion of what he expected or what he must avoid. He was only conscious that the pavilion, with its silk draperies, its scent of musk, and its intolerable secrecy, was no longer endurable. He felt cramped and confused in mind and muscle. He stood for a second to straighten his limbs; then he

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turned, and, moving directly forward, passed through the portière.

After the dimness of the pavilion the conservatory seemed comparatively bright; but without waiting to grow accustomed to the altered light he moved onward with deliberate haste. The long, green alley, was speedily traversed; in his eyes it no longer possessed greenness, no longer suggested freshness or repose. It was simply a means to the end upon which his mind was set.

As he passed up the flight of steps he drew his rings from his pocket and slipped them on again. Then he stepped into the glare of the thronged corridor.

Some one hailed him as he passed through the crowd, but with Chilcote's most absorbed manner he hurried on. Through the door of the supper-room he caught sight of Blessington and Eve, and then for the first time his expression changed, and he turned directly towards them.

"Eve," he said, "will you excuse me? I have a word to say to Blessington."

She glanced at him in momentary surprise; then she smiled in her quiet, self-possessed way.

"Of course!" she said. "I've been wanting a chat with Millicent Gower, but Bobby has required so much entertaining—" She smiled again, this time at Blessington, and moved away towards a pale girl in green who was standing alone.

Instantly she had turned Loder took Blessington's arm.

"I know you're tremendously busy," he began, in an excellent imitation of Chilcote's hasty manner—"I know you're tremendously busy, but I'm in a fix."

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One glance at Blessington's healthy, ingenuous face told him that plain speaking was the method to adopt.

"Indeed, sir?" In a moment Blessington was on the alert.

"Yes. And I—I want your help."

The boy reddened. That Chilcote should appeal to him stirred him to an uneasy feeling of pride and uncertainty.

Loder saw his advantage and pressed it home. "It's come about through this crystal-gazing business. I'm afraid I didn't play my part—rather made an ass of myself; I wouldn't swallow the thing, and—Lady Astrupp—" He paused, measuring Blessington with a glance. "Well, my dear boy, you—you know what women are!"

Blessington was only twenty-three. He reddened again, and assumed an air of profundity. "I know, sir," he said, with a shake of the head.

Loder's sense of humor was keen, but he kept a grave face. "I knew you'd catch my meaning; but I want you to do something more. If Lady Astrupp should ask you who was in her tent this past ten minutes, I want you—" Again he stopped, looking at his companion's face.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want you to tell an immaterial lie for me."

Blessington returned his glance; then he laughed a little uncomfortably. "But surely, sir—"

"She recognized me, you mean?" Loder's eyes were as keen as steel.

"Yes."

"Then you're wrong. She didn't."

Blessington's eyebrows went up.

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There was silence. Loder glanced across the room. Eve had parted from the girl in green and was moving towards them, exchanging smiles and greetings as she came.

"My wife is coming back," he said. "Will you do this for me, Blessington? It—it will smooth things—" He spoke quickly, continuing to watch Eve. As he had hoped, Blessington's eyes turned in the same direction. "Twill smooth matters," he repeated, "smooth them in—in a domestic way that I can't explain."

The shot told. Blessington looked round.

"Right, sir!" he said. "You may leave it to me." And before Loder could speak again he had turned and disappeared into the crowd.