

XVI

HIS business with Blessington over, Loder breathed more freely. If Lady Astrupp had recognized Chilcote by the rings, and had been roused to curiosity, the incident would demand settlement sooner or later—settlement in what proportion he could hazard no guess; if, on the other hand, her obvious change of manner had arisen from any other source—he had a hazy idea that a woman's behavior could never be gauged by accepted theories—then he had safeguarded Chilcote's interests and his own by his securing of Blessington's promise. Blessington he knew would be reliable and discreet. With a renewal of confidence—a pleasant feeling that his uneasiness had been groundless—he moved forward to greet Eve.

Her face, with its rich, clear coloring, seemed to his gaze to stand out from the crowd of other faces as from a frame, and a sense of pride touched him. In every eye but his own her beauty belonged to him.

His face looked alive and masterful as she reached his side. "May I monopolize you?" he said, with the quickness of speech borrowed from Chilcote. "We—we see so little of each other."

Almost as if compelled, her lashes lifted and her eyes met his. Her glance was puzzled, uncertain, slightly confused. There was a deeper color than

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usual in her cheeks. Loder felt something within his own consciousness stir in response.

"You know you are yielding," he said.

Again she blushed.

He saw the blush, and knew that it was he—his words, his personality—that had called it forth. In Chilcote's actual semblance he had proved his superiority over Chilcote. For the first time he had been given a tacit, personal acknowledgment of his power. Involuntarily he drew nearer to her.

"Let's get out of this crush."

She made no answer except to bend her head; and it came to him that, for all her pride, she liked—and unconsciously yielded to—domination. With a satisfied gesture he turned to make a passage towards the door.

But the passage was more easily desired than made. In the few moments since he had entered the supper-room the press of people had considerably thickened—until a block had formed about the door-way. Drawing Eve with him, he moved forward for a dozen paces, then paused, unable to make further headway.

As they stood there, he looked back at her. "What a study in democracy a crowd always is!" he said.

She responded with a bright, appreciative glance, as if surprised into naturalness. He wondered sharply what she would be like if her enthusiasms were really aroused. Then a stir in the corridor outside caused a movement inside the room; and with a certain display of persistence he was enabled to make a passage to the door.

There again they were compelled to halt. But though tightly wedged into his new position and

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guarding Eve with one arm, Loder was free to survey the brilliantly thronged corridor over the head of a man a few inches shorter than himself, who stood directly in front of him.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked, good humorously, addressing the back of the stranger's head.

The man turned, displaying a genial face, a red mustache, and an eye-glass.

"Hullo, Chilcote!" he said. "Hope it's not on your feet I'm standing."

Loder laughed. "No," he said. "And don't change the position. If you were an inch higher I should be blind as well as crippled."

The other laughed. It was a pleasant surprise to find Chilcote amiable under discomfort. He looked round again in slight curiosity.

Loder felt the scrutiny. To create a diversion he looked out along the corridor. "I believe we *are* waiting for something," he exclaimed. "What's this?" Then quite abruptly he ceased to speak.

"Anything interesting?" Eve touched his arm.

He said nothing; he made no effort to look round. His thought as well as his speech was suddenly suspended.

The man in front of him let his eye-glass fall from his eye, then screwed it in again.

"Jove!" he exclaimed. "Here comes our sorceress. It's like the progress of a fairy princess. I believe this *is* the meaning of our getting penned in here." He chuckled delightedly.

Loder said nothing. He stared straight on over the other's head.

Along the corridor, agreeably conscious of the hum

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of admiration she aroused, came Lillian Astrupp, surrounded by a little court. Her delicate face was lit up; her eyes shone under the faint gleam of her hair; her gown of gold embroidery swept round her gracefully. She was radiant and triumphant, but she was also excited. The excitement was evident in her laugh, in her gestures, in her eyes, as they turned quickly in one direction and then another.

Loder, gazing in stupefaction over the other man's head, saw it—felt and understood it with a mind that leaped back over a space of years. As in a shifting panorama he saw a night of disturbance and confusion in a far-off Italian valley—a confusion from which one face shone out with something of the pale, alluring radiance that filtered over the hillside from the crescent moon. It passed across his consciousness slowly but with a slow completeness; and in its light the incidents of the past hour stood out in a new aspect. The echo of recollection stirred by Lady Bramfell's voice, the re-echo of it in the sister's tones; his own blindness, his own egregious assurance—all struck across his mind.

Meanwhile the party about Lillian drew nearer. He felt with instinctive certainty that the supper-room was its destination, but he remained motionless, held by a species of fatalism. He watched her draw near with an unmoved face, but in the brief space that passed while she traversed the corridor he gauged to the full the hold that the new atmosphere, the new existence, had gained over his mind. With an unlooked-for rush of feeling he realized how dearly he would part with it.

As Lillian came closer, the meaning of her manner became clearer to him. She talked incessantly, laugh-

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ing now and then, but her eyes were never quiet. These skimmed the length of the corridor, then glanced over the heads crowded in the door-way.

"I'll have something quite sweet, Geoffrey," she was saying to the man beside her, as she came within hearing. "You know what I like—a sort of snowflake wrapped up in sugar." As she said the words her glance wandered. Loder saw it rest uninterestedly on a boy a yard or two in front of him, then move to the man over whose head he gazed, then lift itself inevitably to his face.

The glance was quick and direct. He saw the look of recognition spring across it; he saw her move forward suddenly as the crowd in the corridor parted to let her pass. Then he saw what seemed to him a miracle.

Her whole expression altered, her lips parted, and she colored with annoyance. She looked like a spoiled child who, seeing a bonbon-box, opens it—to find it empty.

As the press about the door-way melted to give her passage, the red-haired man in front of Loder was the first to take advantage of the space. "Jove! Lillian," he said, moving forward, "you look as if you expected Chilcote to be somebody else, and are disappointed to find he's only himself!" He laughed delightedly at his own joke.

The words were exactly the tonic that Lillian needed. She smiled her usual undisturbed smile as she turned her eyes upon him.

"My dear Leonard, you're using your eye-glass; when that happens you're never responsible for what you see." Her words came more slowly and with a touch of languid amusement. Her composure was suddenly restored.



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Then for the first time Loder changed his position. Moved by an impulse he made no effort to dissect, he stepped back to Eve's side and slipped his arm through hers—successfully concealing his left hand.

The warmth of her skin through her long glove thrilled him unexpectedly. His impulse had been one of self-defence, but the result was of a different character. At the quick contact the wish to fight for—to hold and defend—the position that had grown so dear woke in renewed force. With a new determination he turned again towards Lillian.

"I caught the same impression—without an eye-glass," he said. "Why did you look like that?" He asked the question steadily and with apparent carelessness, though, through it all, his reason stood aghast—his common-sense cried aloud that it was impossible for the eyes that had seen his face in admiration, in love, in contempt, to fail now in recognition. The air seemed breathless while he spoke and waited. His impression of Lillian was a mere shimmering of gold dress and gold hair; all that he was really conscious of was the pressure of his hand on Eve's arm and the warmth of her skin through the soft glove. Then, abruptly, the mist lifted. He saw Lillian's eyes—indifferent, amused, slightly contemptuous; and a second later he heard her voice.

"My dear Jack," she said, sweetly, "how absurd of you! It was simply the contrast of your eyes peering over Leonard's hair. It was like a gorgeous sunset with a black cloud overhead." She laughed. "Do you see what I mean, Eve?" She affected to see Eve for the first time.

Eve had been looking calmly ahead. She turned

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now and smiled serenely. Loder felt no vibration of the arm he held, yet by an instant intuition he knew that the two women were antagonistic. He experienced it with the divination that follows upon a moment of acute suspense. He understood it, as he had understood Lillian's look of recognition when his forehead, eyes, and nose had shown him to be himself; her blank surprise when his close-shaven lip and chin had proclaimed him Chilcote.

He felt like a man who has looked into an abyss and stepped back from the edge, outwardly calm but mentally shaken. The commonplaces of life seemed for the moment to hold deeper meanings. He did not hear Eve's answer, he paid no heed to Lillian's next remark. He saw her smile and turn to the red-haired man; finally he saw her move on into the supper-room, followed by her little court. Then he pressed the arm he was still holding. He felt an urgent need of companionship—of a human expression to the crisis he had passed.

"Shall we get out of this?" he asked again.

Eve looked up. "Out of the room?" she said.

He looked down at her, compelling her gaze. "Out of the room—and the house," he answered. "Let us go—home."

XVII

THE necessary formalities of departure were speedily got through. The passing of the corridors, the gaining of the carriage, seemed to Loder to be marvelously simple proceedings. Then, as he sat by Eve's side and again felt the forward movement of the horses, he had leisure for the first time to wonder whether the time that had passed since last he occupied that position had actually been lived through.

Only that night he had unconsciously compared one incident in his life to a sketch in which the lights and shadows have been obliterated and lost. Now that picture rose before him, startlingly and incredibly intact. He saw the sunlit houses of Santasalare, backgrounded by the sunlit hills—saw them as plainly as when he himself had sketched them on his memory. Every detail of the scene remained the same, even to the central figure; only the eye and the hand of the artist had changed.

At this point Eve broke in upon his thoughts. Her first words were curiously coincidental.

"What did you think of Lillian Astrupp to-night?" she asked. "Wasn't her gown perfect?"

Loder lifted his head with an almost guilty start. Then he answered straight from his thoughts.

"I—I didn't notice it," he said; "but her eyes reminded me of a cat's eyes—and she walks like a cat. I never seemed to see it—until to-night."