

ON the same day that Chilcote had parted with Lillian—but at three o'clock in the afternoon—Loder, dressed in Chilcote's clothes and with Chilcote's heavy overcoat slung over his arm, walked from Fleet Street to Grosvenor Square. He walked steadily, neither slowly nor yet fast. The elation of his last journey over the same ground was tempered by feelings he could not satisfactorily bracket even to himself. There was less of vehement elation and more of matured determination in his gait and bearing than there had been on that night, though the incidents of which they were the outcome were very complex.

On reaching Chilcote's house he passed up-stairs; but, still following the routine of his previous return, he did not halt at Chilcote's door, but moved onward towards Eve's sitting-room and there paused.

In that pause his numberless irregular thoughts fused into one.

He had the same undefined sense of standing upon sacred ground that had touched him on the previous occasion, but the outcome of the sensation was different. This time he raised his hand almost immediately and tapped on the door.

He waited, but no voice responded to his knock. With a sense of disappointment he knocked again; then, pressing his determination still further, he turned the handle and entered the room.

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No private room is without meaning—whether trivial or the reverse. In a room, perhaps more even than in speech, in look, or in work, does the impress of the individual make itself felt. There, on the wax of outer things, the inner self imprints its seal—enforces its fleeting claim to separate individuality. This thought, with its arresting interest, made Loder walk slowly, almost seriously, half-way across the room and then pause to study his surroundings.

The room was of medium size—not too large for comfort and not too small for ample space. At a first impression it struck him as unlike any anticipation of a woman's sanctum. The walls panelled in dark wood; the richly bound books; the beautifully designed bronze ornaments; even the flowers, deep crimson and violet-blue in tone, had an air of sombre harmony that was scarcely feminine. With a strangely pleasant impression he realized this, and, following his habitual impulse, moved slowly forward towards the fireplace and there paused, his elbow resting on the mantel-piece.

He had scarcely settled comfortably into his position, scarcely entered on his second and more comprehensive study of the place, than the arrangement of his mind was altered by the turning of the handle and the opening of the door.

The new-comer was Eve herself. She was dressed in outdoor clothes, and walked into the room quickly; then, as Loder had done, she too paused.

The gesture, so natural and spontaneous, had a peculiar attraction; as she glanced up at him, her face alight with inquiry, she seemed extraordinarily much the owner and designer of her surroundings. She was framed by them as naturally and effectively as her eyes

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and her face were framed by her black hair. For one moment he forgot that his presence demanded explanation; the next she had made explanation needless. She had been looking at him intently; now she came forward slowly.

"John?" she said, half in appeal, half in question.

He took a step towards her. "Look at me," he said, quietly and involuntarily. In the sharp desire to establish himself in her regard he forgot that her eyes had never left his face.

But the incongruity of the words did not strike her. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "I—I believe I *knew*, directly I saw you here." The quick ring of life vibrating in her tone surprised him. But he had other thoughts more urgent than surprise.

In the five days of banishment just lived through, the need for a readjustment of his position with regard to her had come to him forcibly. The memory of the night when weakness and he had been at perilously close quarters had returned to him persistently and uncomfortably, spoiling the remembrance of his triumph. It had been well enough to smother the thought of that night in days of work. But had the ignoring of it blotted out the weakness? Had it not rather thrown it into bolder relief? A man strong in his own strength does not turn his back upon temptation; he faces and quells it. In the solitary days in Clifford's Inn, in the solitary night-hours spent in tramping the city streets, this had been the conviction that had recurred again and again, this the problem to which, after much consideration, he had found a solution—satisfactory at least to himself. When next Chilcote called him—It was notable that he had used the word "when"

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and not "if." When next Chilcote called him he would make a new departure. He would no longer avoid Eve; he would successfully prove to himself that one interest and one alone filled his mind—the pursuance of Chilcote's political career. So does man satisfactorily convince himself against himself. He had this intention fully in mind as he came forward now.

"Well," he said, slowly, "has it been very hard to have faith—these last five days?" It was not precisely the tone he had meant to adopt; but one must begin.

Eve turned at his words. Her eyes were brimming with life, her cheeks still touched to a deep, soft color by the keenness of the wintry air.

"No," she answered, with a shy, responsive touch of confidence. "I seemed to keep on believing. You know converts make the best devotees." She laughed with slight embarrassment, and glanced up at him. Something in the blue of her eyes reminded him unexpectedly of spring skies—full of youth and promise.

He moved abruptly, and crossed the room towards the window. "Eve," he said, without looking round, "I want your help."

He heard the faint rustling of her dress as she turned towards him, and he knew that he had struck the right chord. All true women respond to an appeal for aid as steel answers to the magnet. He could feel her expectancy in the silence.

"You know—we all know—that the present moment is very vital. That it's impossible to deny the crisis in the air. Nobody feels it more than I do—nobody is more exorbitantly keen to have a share—a part, when the real fight comes—" He stopped; then he

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turned slowly and their eyes met. "If a man is to succeed in such a desire," he went on, deliberately, "he must exclude all others—he must have one purpose, one interest, one thought. He must forget that—"

Eve lifted her head quickly. "—that he has a wife," she finished, gently. "I think I understand."

There was no annoyance in her face or voice, no suggestion of selfishness or of hurt vanity. She had read his meaning with disconcerting clearness, and responded with disconcerting generosity. A sudden and very human dissatisfaction with his readjustment scheme fell upon Loder. Opposition is the whip to action; a too-ready acquiescence the slackened rein.

"Did I say that?" he asked, quickly. The tone was almost Chilcote's.

She glanced up; then a sudden, incomprehensible smile lighted up her face.

"You didn't say, but you thought," she answered, gravely. "Thoughts are the same as words to a woman. That's why we are so unreasonable." Again she smiled. Some idea, baffling and incomprehensible to Loder, was stirring in her mind.

Conscious of the impression, he moved still nearer. "You jump to conclusions," he said, abruptly. "What I meant to imply—"

"—was precisely what I've understood." Again she finished his sentence. Then she laughed softly. "How very wise, but how very, very foolish men are! You come to the conclusion that because a woman is— is interested in you she is going to hamper you in some direction, and after infinite pains you summon all your tact and you set about saving the situation."

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There was interest, even a touch of amusement, in her tone; her eyes were still fixed upon his in an indefinable glance. "You think you are being very diplomatic," she went on, quietly, "but in reality you are being very transparent. The woman reads the whole of your meaning in your very first sentence—if she hasn't known it before you began to speak."

Again Loder made an interruption, but again she checked him.

"No," she said, still smiling. "You should never attempt such a task. Shall I tell you why?"

He stood silent, puzzled and interested.

"Because," she said, quickly, "when a woman really is—interested, the man's career ranks infinitely higher in her eyes than any personal desire for power."

For a moment their eyes met, then abruptly Loder looked away. She had gauged his intentions incorrectly, yet with disconcerting insight. Again the suggestion of an unusual personality below the serenity of her manner recurred to his imagination.

With an impulse altogether foreign to him he lifted his head and again met her glance. Then at last he spoke, but only two words. "Forgive me!" he said, with simple, direct sincerity.