

AFTER his interview with Eve, Loder retired to the study and spent the remaining hours of the day and the whole span of the evening in work. At one o'clock, still feeling fresh in mind and body, he dismissed Greening and passed into Chilcote's bedroom. The interview with Eve, though widely different from the one he had anticipated, had left him stimulated and alert. In the hours that followed it there had been an added anxiety to put his mind into harness, an added gratification in finding it answer to the rein.

A pleasant sense of retrospection settled upon him as he slowly undressed; and a pleasant sense of interest touched him as, crossing to the dressing-table, he caught sight of Chilcote's engagement-book—taken with other things from the suit he had changed at dinner-time and carefully laid aside by Renwick.

He picked it up and slowly turned the pages. It always held the suggestion of a lottery—this dipping into another man's engagements and drawing a prize or a blank. It was a sensation that even custom had not dulled.

At first he turned the pages slowly, then by degrees his fingers quickened. Beyond the fact that this present evening was free, he knew nothing of his promised movements. The abruptness of Chilcote's arrival at Clifford's Inn in the afternoon had left no

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time for superfluous questions. He skimmed the writing with a touch of interested haste, then all at once he paused and smiled.

"Big enough for a tombstone!" he said below his breath as his eyes rested on a large blue cross. Then he smiled again and held the book to the light.

"Dine 33 Cadogan Gardens, 8 o'clock. Talk with L," he read, still speaking softly to himself.

He stood for a moment pondering on the entry, then once more his glance reverted to the cross.

"Evidently meant it to be seen," he mused; "but why the deuce isn't he more explicit?" As he spoke, a look of comprehension suddenly crossed his face and the puzzled frown between his eyebrows cleared away.

With a feeling of satisfaction he remembered Lakely's frequent and pressing suggestion that he should dine with him at Cadogan Gardens and discuss the political outlook.

Lakely must have written during his absence, and Chilcote, having marked the engagement, felt no further responsibility. The invitation could scarcely have been verbal, as Chilcote, he knew, had lain very low in the five days of his return home.

So he argued, as he stood with the book still open in his hands, the blue cross staring imperatively from the white paper. And from the argument rose thoughts and suggestions that seethed in his mind long after the lights had been switched off, long after the fire had died down and he had been left wrapped in darkness in the great canopied bed.

And so it came about that he took his second false step. Once during the press of the next morning's work it crossed his mind to verify his convictions by

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a glance at the directory. But for once the strong wish that evolves a thought conquered his caution. His work was absorbing; the need of verification seemed very small. He let the suggestion pass.

At seven o'clock he dressed carefully. His mind was full of Lakely and of the possibilities the night might hold; for more than once before, the weight of the *St. George's Gazette*, with Lakely at its back, had turned the political scales. To be marked by him as a coming man was at any time a favorable portent; to be singled out by him at the present juncture was momentous. A thrill of expectancy, almost of excitement, passed through him as he surveyed his appearance preparatory to leaving the house.

Passing down-stairs, he moved at once to the hall door; but almost as his hand touched it he halted, attracted by a movement on the landing above him. Turning, he saw Eve.

She was standing quite still, looking down upon him as she had looked once before. As their eyes met, she changed her position hastily.

"You are going out?" she asked. And it struck Loder quickly that there was a suggestion, a shadow of disappointment in the tone of her voice. Moved by the impression, he responded with unusual promptness.

"Yes," he said. "I'm dining out—dining with Lakely."

She watched him intently while he spoke; then, as the meaning of his words reached her, her whole face brightened.

"With Mr. Lakely?" she said. "Oh, I'm glad—very glad. It is quite—quite another step." She smiled with a warm, impulsive touch of sympathy.

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Loder, looking up at her, felt his senses stir. At sound of her words his secret craving for success quickened to stronger life. The man whose sole incentive lies within may go forward coldly and successfully; but the man who grasps a double inspiration, who, even unconsciously, is impelled by another force, has a stronger impetus for attack, a surer, more vital hewing power. Still watching her, he answered instinctively:

"Yes," he said, slowly, "a long step." And, with a smile of farewell, he turned, opened the door, and passed into the road.

The thrill of that one moment was still warm as he reached Cadogan Gardens and mounted the steps of No. 33—so vitally warm that he paused for an instant before pressing the electric bell. Then at last, dominated by anticipation, he turned and raised his hand.

The action was abrupt, and it was only as his fingers pressed the bell that a certain unexpectedness, a certain want of suitability in the aspect of the house, struck him. The door was white, the handle and knocker were of massive silver. The first seemed a disappointing index of Lakely's private taste, the second a ridiculous temptation to needy humanity. He looked again at the number of the house, but it stared back at him convincingly. Then the door opened.

So keen was his sense of unfitness that, still trying to fuse his impression of Lakely with the idea of silver door-fittings, he stepped into the hall without the usual preliminary question. Suddenly realizing the necessity, he turned to the servant; but the man forestalled him:

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"Will you come to the white room, sir? And may I take your coat?"

The smooth certainty of the man's manner surprised him. It held another savor of disappointment—seeming as little in keeping with the keen, business-like Lakely as did the house. Still struggling with his impression, he allowed himself to be relieved of his hat and coat and in silence ushered up the shallow staircase.

As the last step was reached it came to him again to mention his host's name; but simultaneously with the suggestion the servant stepped forward with a quick, silent movement and threw open a door.

"Mr. Chilcote!" he announced, in a subdued, discreet voice.

Loder's first impression was of a room that seemed unusually luxurious, soft, and shadowed. Then all impression of inanimate things left him suddenly.

For the fraction of a second he stood in the door-way, while the room seemed emptied of everything, except a figure that rose slowly from a couch before the fire at sound of Chilcote's name; then, with a calmness that to himself seemed incredible, he moved forward into the room.

He might, of course, have beaten a retreat and obviated many things; but life is full of might-have-beens, and retreat never presents itself agreeably to a strong man. His impulse was to face the difficulty, and he acted on the impulse.

Lillian had risen slowly; and as he neared her she held out her hand.

"Jack!" she exclaimed, softly. "How sweet of you to remember!"

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The voice and words came to him with great distinctness, and as they came one uncertainty passed forever from his mind—the question as to what relation she and Chilcote held to each other. With the realization came the thought of Eve, and in the midst of his own difficulty his face hardened.

Lillian ignored the coldness. Taking his hand, she smiled. "You're unusually punctual," she said. "But your hands are cold. Come closer to the fire."

Loder was not sensible that his hands were cold, but he suffered himself to be drawn forward.

One end of the couch was in firelight, the other in shadow. By a fortunate arrangement of chance Lillian selected the brighter end for herself and offered the other to her guest. With a quick sense of respite he accepted it. At least he could sit secure from detection while he temporized with fate.

For a moment they sat silent, then Lillian stirred. "Won't you smoke?" she asked.

Everything in the room seemed soft and enervating—the subdued glow of the fire, the smell of roses that hung about the air, and, last of all, Lillian's slow, soothing voice. With a sense of oppression he stiffened his shoulders and sat straighter in his place.

"No," he said, "I don't think I shall smoke."

She moved nearer to him. "Dear Jack," she said, pleadingly, "don't say you're in a bad mood. Don't say you want to postpone again." She looked up at him and laughed a little in mock consternation.

Loder was at a loss.

Another silence followed, while Lillian waited; then she frowned suddenly and rose from the couch. Like many indolent people, she possessed a touch of ob-

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stinacy; and now that her triumph over Chilcote was obtained, now that she had vindicated her right to command him, her original purpose came uppermost again. Cold or interested, indifferent or attentive, she intended to make use of him.

She moved to the fire and stood looking down into it.

"Jack," she began, gently, "a really amazing thing has happened to me. I do so want you to throw some light."

Loder said nothing.

There was a fresh pause while she softly smoothed the silk embroidery that edged her gown. Then once more she looked up at him.

"Did I ever tell you," she began, "that I was once in a railway accident on a funny little Italian railway, centuries before I met you?" She laughed softly; and with a pretty air of confidence turned from the fire and resumed her seat.

"Astrupp had caught a fever in Florence, and I was rushing away for fear of the infection, when our stupid little train ran off the rails near Pistoria and smashed itself up. Fortunately we were within half a mile of a village, so we weren't quite bereft. The village was impossibly like a toy village, and the accommodation what one would expect in a Noah's Ark, but it was all absolutely picturesque. I put up at the little inn with my maid and Ko Ko—Ko Ko was such a sweet dog—a white poodle. I was tremendously keen on poodles that year." She stopped and looked thoughtfully towards the fire.

"But to come to the point of the story, Jack, the toy village had a boy doll!" She laughed again. "He was an Englishman—and the first person to come to

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my rescue on the night of the smash-up. He was staying at the Noah's Ark inn; and after that first night I—he—we— Oh, Jack, haven't you any imagination?" Her voice sounded petulant and sharp. The man who is indifferent to the recital of an old love affair implies the worst kind of listener. "I believe you aren't interested," she added, in another and more reproachful tone.

He leaned forward. "You're wrong there," he said, slowly. "I'm deeply interested."

She glanced at him again. His tone reassured her, but his words left her uncertain; Chilcote was rarely emphatic. With a touch of hesitation she went on with her tale:

"As I told you, he was the first to find us—to find me, I should say, for my stupid maid was having hysterics farther up the line, and Ko Ko was lost. I remember the first thing I did was to send him in search of Ko Ko—"

Notwithstanding his position, Loder found occasion to smile. "Did he succeed?" he said, dryly.

"Succeed? Oh yes, he succeeded." She also smiled involuntarily. "Poor Ko Ko was stowed away under the luggage-van; and after quite a lot of trouble he pulled him out. When it was all done the dog was quite unhurt and livelier than ever, but the Englishman had his finger almost bitten through. Ko Ko was a dear, but his teeth and his temper were both very sharp!" She laughed once more in soft amusement.

Loder was silent for a second, then he too laughed—Chilcote's short, sarcastic laugh. "And you tied up the wound, I suppose?"

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She glanced up, half displeased. "We were both staying at the little inn," she said, as though no further explanation could be needed. Then again her manner changed. She moved imperceptibly nearer and touched his right hand. His left, which was farther away from her, was well in the shadow of the cushions.

"Jack," she said, caressingly, "it isn't to tell you this stupid old story that I've brought you here; it's really to tell you a sort of sequel." She stroked his hand gently once or twice. "As I say, I met this man and we—we had an affair. You understand? Then we quarrelled—quarrelled quite badly—and I came away. I've remembered him rather longer than I remember most people—he was one of those dogged individuals who stick in one's mind. But he has stayed in mine for another reason—" Again she looked up. "He has stayed because you helped to keep him there. You know how I have sometimes put my hands over your mouth and told you that your eyes reminded me of some one else? Well, that some one else was my Englishman. But you mustn't be jealous; he was a horrid, obstinate person, and you—well, you know what I think of you—" She pressed his hand. "But to come to the end of the story, I never saw this man since that long-ago time, until—until the night of Blanche's party!" She spoke slowly, to give full effect to her words; then she waited for his surprise.

But the result was not what she expected. He said nothing; and, with an abrupt movement, he drew his hand from between hers.

"Aren't you surprised?" she asked at last, with a delicate note of reproof.

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He started slightly, as if recalled to the necessity of the moment. "Surprised?" he said. "Why should I be surprised? One person more or less at a big party isn't astonishing. Besides, you expect a man to turn up sooner or later in his own country. Why should I be surprised?"

She lay back luxuriously. "Because, my dear boy," she said, softly, "it's a mystery! It's one of those fascinating mysteries that come once in a lifetime."

Loder made no movement. "You must explain," he said, very quietly.

Lillian smiled. "That's just what I want to do. When I was in my tent on the night of Blanche's party, a man came to be gazed for. He came just like anybody else, and laid his hands upon the table. He had strong, thin hands like—well, rather like yours. But he wore two rings on the third finger of his left hand—a heavy signet-ring and a plain gold one."

Loder moved his hand imperceptibly till the cushion covered it. Lillian's words caused him no surprise, scarcely even any trepidation. He felt now that he had expected them, even waited for them, all along.

"I asked him to take off his rings," she went on, "and just for a second he hesitated—I could feel him hesitate; then he seemed to make up his mind, for he drew them off. He drew them off, Jack, and guess what I saw! Do guess!"

For the first time Loder involuntarily drew back into his corner of the couch. "I never guess," he said, brusquely.

"Then I'll tell you. His hands were the hands of my Englishman! The rings covered the scar made by Ko Ko's teeth. I knew it instantly—the second

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my eyes rested on it. It was the same scar that I had bound up dozens of times—that I had seen healed before I left Santasalare.”

“And you? What did you do?” Loder felt it singularly difficult and unpleasant to speak.

“Ah, that’s the point. That’s where I was stupid and made my mistake. I should have spoken to him on the moment, but I didn’t. You know how one sometimes hesitates. Afterwards it was too late.”

“But you saw him afterwards—in the rooms?” Loder spoke unwillingly.

“No, I didn’t—that’s the other point. I didn’t see him in the rooms, and I haven’t seen him since. Directly he was gone, I left the tent—I pretended to be hungry and bored; but, though I went through every room, he was nowhere to be found. Once—” she hesitated and laughed again—“once I thought I had found him, but it was only you—you, as you stood in that door-way with your mouth and chin hidden by Leonard Kaine’s head. Wasn’t it a quaint mistake?”

There was an uncertain pause. Then Loder, feeling the need of speech, broke the silence suddenly. “Where do I come in?” he asked abruptly. “What am I wanted for?”

“To help to throw light on the mystery! I’ve seen Blanche’s list of people, and there wasn’t a man I couldn’t place—no outsider ever squeezes through Blanche’s door. I have questioned Bobby Blessington, but he can’t remember who came to the tent last. And Bobby was supposed to have kept count!” She spoke in deep scorn; but almost immediately the scorn faded and she smiled again. “Now that I’ve explained, Jack,” she added, “what do you suggest?”

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Then for the first time Loder knew what his presence in the room really meant; and at best the knowledge was disconcerting. It is not every day that a man is called upon to unearth himself.

“Suggest?” he repeated, blankly.

“Yes. I’d rather have your idea of the affair than anybody else’s. You are so dear and sarcastic and keen that you can’t help getting straight at the middle of a fact.”

When Lillian wanted anything she could be very sweet. She suddenly dropped her half-petulant tone; she suddenly ceased to be a spoiled child. With a perfectly graceful movement she drew quite close to Loder and slid gently to her knees.

This is an attitude that few women can safely assume; it requires all the attributes of youth, suppleness, and a certain buoyant ease. But Lillian never acted without justification, and as she leaned towards Loder her face lifted, her slight figure and pale hair softened by the firelight, she made a picture that it would have been difficult to criticise.

But the person who should have appreciated it stared steadily beyond it to the fire. His mind was absorbed by one question—the question of how he might reasonably leave the house before discovery became assured.

Lillian, attentively watchful of him, saw the uneasy look, and her own face fell. But, as she looked, an inspiration came to her—a remembrance of many interviews with Chilcote smoothed and facilitated by the timely use of tobacco.

“Jack,” she said, softly, “before you say another word I insist on your lighting a cigarette.” She leaned forward, resting against his knee.

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At her words Loder's eyes left the fire. His attention was suddenly needed for a new and more imminent difficulty. "Thanks!" he said, quickly. "I—I have no wish to smoke."

"It isn't a matter of what you wish but of what I say." She smiled. She knew that Chilcote with a cigarette between his lips was infinitely more tractable than Chilcote sitting idle, and she had no intention of ignoring the knowledge.

But Loder caught at her words. "Before you ordered me to smoke," he said, "you told me to give you some advice. Your first command must have prior claim." He grasped unhesitatingly at the less risky theme.

She looked up at him. "You're always nicer when you smoke," she persisted, caressingly. "Light a cigarette—and give me one."

Loder's mouth became set. "No," he said, "we'll stick to this advice business. It interests me."

"Yes—afterwards."

"No, now. You want to find out why this Englishman from Italy was at your sister's party, and why he disappeared?"

There are times when a malignant obstinacy seems to affect certain people. The only answer Lillian made was to pass her hand over Loder's waistcoat, and, feeling his cigarette-case, to draw it from the pocket.

He affected not to see it. "Do you think he recognized you in that tent?" he insisted, desperately.

She held out the case. "Here are your cigarettes. You *know* we're always more social when we smoke."

In the short interval while she looked up into his face several ideas passed through Loder's mind. He



"LILLIAN SLID GENTLY TO HER KNEES"