

## XXVIII

L ODER'S plan of action was arrived at before he reached Trafalgar Square. The facts of the case were simple. Chilcote had left an incriminating telegram on the bureau in the morning-room at Grosvenor Square; by an unlucky chance Lillian Astrupp had been shown up into that room, where she had remained alone until the moment that Eve, either by request or by accident, had found her there. The facts resolved themselves into one question. What use had Lillian made of those solitary moments? Without deviation, Loder's mind turned towards one answer. Lillian was not the woman to lose an opportunity, whether the space at her command were long or short. True, Eve too had been alone in the room, while Chilcote had accompanied Lillian to the door; but of this he made small account. Eve had been there, but Lillian had been there first. Judging by precedent, by personal character, by all human probability, it was not to be supposed that anything would have been left for the second comer.

So convinced was he that, reaching Trafalgar Square, he stopped and hailed a hansom.

"Cadogan Gardens!" he called. "No. 33."

The moments seemed very few before the cab drew up beside the curb and he caught his second glimpse of the enamelled door with its silver fittings. The white

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and silver gleamed in the sunshine; banks of cream-colored hyacinths clustered on the window-sills, filling the clear air with a warm and fragrant scent. With that strange sensation of having lived through the scene before, Loder left the cab and walked up the steps. Instantly he pressed the bell the door was opened by Lillian's discreet, deferential man-servant.

"Is Lady Astrupp at home?" he asked.

The man looked thoughtful. "Her ladyship lunched at home, sir—" he began, cautiously.

But Loder interrupted him. "Ask her to see me," he said, laconically.

The servant expressed no surprise. His only comment was to throw the door wide.

"If you'll wait in the white room, sir," he said, "I'll inform her ladyship." Chilcote was evidently a frequent and a favored visitor.

In this manner Loder for the second time entered the house so unfamiliar—and yet so familiar in all that it suggested. Entering the drawing-room, he had leisure to look about him. It was a beautiful room, large and lofty; luxury was evident on every hand, but it was not the luxury that palls or offends. Each object was graceful, and possessed its own intrinsic value. The atmosphere was too effeminate to appeal to him, but he acknowledged the taste and artistic delicacy it conveyed. Almost at the moment of acknowledgment the door opened to admit Lillian.

She wore the same gown of pale-colored cloth, warmed and softened by rich furs, that she had worn on the day she and Chilcote had driven in the park.

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She was drawing on her gloves as she came into the room; and pausing near the door, she looked across at Loder and, laughed in her slow, amused way.

"I thought it would be you," she said, enigmatically.

Loder came forward. "You expected me?" he said, guardedly. A sudden conviction filled him that it was not the evidence of her eyes, but something at once subtler and more definite, that prompted her recognition of him.

She smiled. "Why should I expect you? On the contrary, I'm waiting to know why you're here?"

He was silent for an instant; then he answered in her own light tone. "As far as that goes," he said, "let's make it my duty call—having dined with you. I'm an old-fashioned person."

For a full second she surveyed him amusedly; then at last she spoke. "My dear Jack"—she laid particular stress on the name—"I never imagined you punctilious. I should have thought bohemian would have been more the word."

Loder felt disconcerted and annoyed. Either, like himself, she was fishing for information, or she was deliberately playing with him. In his perplexity he glanced across the room towards the fireplace.

Lillian saw the look. "Won't you sit down?" she said, indicating the couch. "I promise not to make you smoke. I sha'n't even ask you to take off your gloves!"

Loder made no movement. His mind was unpleasantly upset. It was nearly a fortnight since he had seen Lillian, and in the interval her attitude had changed, and the change puzzled him. It might mean the philosophy of a woman who, knowing herself with-



"'I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE YOU,' SHE SAID"

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out adequate weapons, withdraws from a combat that has proved fruitless; or it might imply the merely catlike desire to toy with a certainty. He looked quickly at the delicate face, the green eyes somewhat obliquely set, the unreliable mouth; and instantly he inclined to the latter theory. The conviction that she possessed the telegram filled him suddenly, and with it came the desire to put his belief to the test—to know beyond question whether her smiling unconcern meant malice or mere entertainment.

"When you first came into the room," he said, quietly, "you said 'I thought it would be you.' Why did you say that?"

Again she smiled—the smile that might be malicious or might be merely amused. "Oh," she answered at last, "I only meant that though I had been told Jack Chilcote wanted me, it wasn't Jack Chilcote I expected to see!"

After her statement there was a pause. Loder's position was difficult. Instinctively convinced that, strong in the possession of her proof, she was enjoying his tantalized discomfort, he yet craved the actual evidence that should set his suspicions to rest. Acting upon the desire, he made a new beginning.

"Do you know why I came?" he asked.

Lillian looked up innocently. "It's so hard to be certain of anything in this world," she said. "But one is always at liberty to guess."

Again he was perplexed. Her attitude was not quite the attitude of one who controls the game, and yet—He looked at her with a puzzled scrutiny. Women for him had always spelled the incomprehensible; he was at his best, his strongest, his surest in the presence of

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men. Feeling his disadvantage, yet determined to gain his end, he made a last attempt.

"How did you amuse yourself at Grosvenor Square this morning before Eve came to you?" he asked. The effort was awkwardly blunt, but it was direct.

Lillian was buttoning her glove. She did not raise her head as he spoke, but her fingers paused in their task. For a second she remained motionless, then she looked up slowly.

"Oh," she said, sweetly, "so I was right in my guess? You did come to find out whether I sat in the morning-room with my hands in my lap—or wandered about in search of entertainment?"

Loder colored with annoyance and apprehension. Every look, every tone of Lillian's was distasteful to him. No microscope could have revealed her more fully to him than did his own eyesight. But it was not the moment for personal antipathies; there were other interests than his own at stake. With new resolution he returned her glance.

"Then I must still ask my first question, why did you say, 'I thought it would be you?'" His gaze was direct—so direct that it disconcerted her. She laughed a little uneasily.

"Because I knew."

"How did you know?"

"Because—" she began; then again she laughed. "Because," she added, quickly, as if moved by a fresh impulse, "Jack Chilcote made it very obvious to any one who was in his morning-room at twelve o'clock to-day that it would be *you* and not *he* who would be found filling his place this afternoon! It's all very well to talk about honor, but when one walks into an

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empty room and sees a telegram as long as a letter open on a bureau—"

But her sentence was never finished. Loder had heard what he came to hear; any confession she might have to offer was of no moment in his eyes.

"My dear girl," he broke in, brusquely, "don't trouble! I should make a most unsatisfactory father confessor." He spoke quickly. His color was still high, but not of annoyance. His suspense was transformed into unpleasant certainty; but the exchange left him surer of himself. His perplexity had dropped to a quiet sense of self-reliance; his paramount desire was for solitude in which to prepare for the task that lay before him; the most congenial task the world possessed—the unravelling of Chilcote's tangled skeins. Looking into Lillian's eyes, he smiled. "Good-bye!" he said, holding out his hand. "I think we've finished—for to-day."

She slowly extended her fingers. Her expression and attitude were slightly puzzled—a puzzlement that was either spontaneous or singularly well assumed. As their hands touched she smiled again.

"Will you drop in at the 'Arcadian' to-night?" she said. "It's the dramatized version of *Other Men's Shoes!* The temptation to make you see it was too irresistible—as you know."

There was a pause while she waited for his answer—her head inclined to one side, her green eyes gleaming.

Loder, conscious of her regard, hesitated for a moment. Then his face cleared. "Right!" he said, slowly. "'The Arcadian' to-night!"

XXIX

LODER'S frame of mind as he left Cadogan Gardens was peculiar. Once more he was living in the present—the forceful, exhilarating present, and the knowledge braced him. Upon one point his mind was satisfied. Lillian Astrupp had found the telegram, and it remained to him to render her find valueless. How he proposed to do this, how he proposed to come out triumphant in face of such a situation, was a matter that as yet was shapeless in his mind; nevertheless, the danger—the sense of impending conflict—had a savor of life after the inaction of the day and night just passed. Chilcote in his weakness and his entanglement had turned to him; and he in his strength and capacity had responded to the appeal.

His step was firm and his bearing assured as he turned into Grosvenor Square and walked towards the familiar house.

The habit of self-deceit is as insidious and tenacious as any vice. For one moment on the night of his great speech, as he leaned out of Chilcote's carriage and met Chilcote's eyes, Loder had seen himself—and under the shock of revelation had taken decisive action. But in the hours subsequent to that action the plausible, inner voice had whispered unceasingly, soothing his wounded self-esteem, rebuilding stone by stone the temple of his egotism; until at last when Chilcote,

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panic-stricken at his own action, had burst into his rooms ready to plead or to coerce, he had found no need for either coercion or entreaty. By a power more subtle and effective than any at his command, Loder had been prepared for his coming—unconsciously ready with an acquiescence before his appeal had been made. It was the fruit of this preparation, the inevitable outcome of it, that strengthened his step and steadied his hand as he mounted the steps and opened the hall door of Chilcote's house on that eventful afternoon.

The dignity, the air of quiet solidity, impressed him as it never failed to do, as he crossed the large hall and ascended the stairs—the same stairs that he had passed down almost as an outcast not so many hours before. He was filled with the sense of things regained; belief in his own star lifted him as it had done a hundred times before in these same surroundings.

He quickened his steps as the sensation came to him. Then, reaching the head of the stairs, he turned directly towards Eve's sitting-room, and, gaining the door, knocked. The strength of his eagerness, the quick beating of his pulse as he waited for a response, surprised him. He had told himself many times that his passion, however strong, would never again conquer as it had done two nights ago—and the fact that he had come thus candidly to Eve's room was to his mind a proof that temptation could be dared. Nevertheless there was something disconcerting to a strong man in this merely physical perturbation; and when Eve's voice came to him, giving permission to enter, he paused for an instant to steady himself; then with sudden decision he opened the door and walked into the room.

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The blinds were partly drawn, there was a scent of violets in the air, and a fire glowed warmly in the grate. He noted these things carefully, telling himself that a man should always be alertly sensible of his surroundings; then all at once the nice balancing of detail suddenly gave way. He forgot everything but the one circumstance that Eve was standing in the window—her back to the light, her face towards him. With his pulses beating faster and an unsteady sensation in his brain, he moved forward holding out his hand.

"Eve—?" he said below his breath.

But Eve remained motionless. As he came into the room she had glanced at him—a glance of quick, searching question; then with equal suddenness she had averted her eyes. As he drew close to her now, she remained immovable.

"Eve—" he said again. "I wanted to see you—I wanted to explain about yesterday and about this morning." He paused, suddenly disturbed. The full remembrance of the scene in the brougham had surged up at sight of her—had risen a fierce, unquenchable recollection. "Eve—" he began again in a new, abrupt tone.

And then it was that Eve showed herself in a fresh light. From his entrance into the room she had stayed motionless, save for her first glance of acute inquiry; but now her demeanor changed. For almost the first time in Loder's knowledge of her the vitality and force that he had vaguely apprehended below her quiet, serene exterior sprang up like a flame within whose radius things are illuminated. With a quick gesture she turned towards him, her warm color deepening, her eyes suddenly alight.

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"I understand," she said, "I understand. Don't try to explain! Can't you see that it's enough to—to see you as you are—?"

Loder was surprised. Remembering their last passionate scene, and the damper Chilcote's subsequent presence must inevitably have cast upon it, he had expected to be doubtfully received; but the reality of the reception left him bewildered. Eve's manner was not that of the ill-used wife; its vehemence, its note of desire and depreciation, were more suggestive of his own ardent seizing of the present, as distinguished from past or future. With an odd sense of confusion he turned to her afresh.

"Then I am forgiven?" he said. And unconsciously, as he moved nearer, he touched her arm.

At his touch she started. All the yielding sweetness, all the submission, that had marked her two nights ago was gone; in its place she was possessed by a curious excitement that stirred while it perplexed.

Loder, moved by the sensation, took another step forward. "Then I am forgiven?" he repeated, more softly.

Her face was averted as he spoke, but he felt her arm quiver; and when at last she lifted her head, their eyes met. Neither spoke, but in an instant Loder's arms were round her.

For a long, silent space they stood holding each other closely. Then, with a sharp movement, Eve freed herself. Her color was still high, her eyes still peculiarly bright, but the bunch of violets she had worn in her belt had fallen to the ground.

"John—" she said, quickly; but on the word her breath caught. With a touch of nervousness she stooped to pick up the flowers.

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Loder noticed both voice and gesture. "What is it?" he said. "What were you going to say?"

But she made no answer. For a second longer she searched for the violets; then, as he bent to assist her, she stood up quickly and laughed—a short, embarrassed laugh.

"How absurd and nervous I am!" she exclaimed. "Like a school-girl instead of a woman of twenty-four. You must help me to be sensible." Her cheeks still burned, her manner was still excited, like one who holds an emotion or an impulse at bay.

Loder looked at her uncertainly. "Eve—" he began afresh with his odd, characteristic perseverance, but she instantly checked him. There was a finality, a faint suggestion of fear, in her protest.

"Don't!" she said. "Don't! I don't want explanations. I want to—to enjoy the moment without having things analyzed or smoothed away. Can't you understand? Can't you see that I'm wonderfully, terribly happy to—to have you—as you are!" Again her voice broke—a break that might have been a laugh or a sob.

The sound was an emotional crisis, as such a sound invariably is. It arrested and steadied her. For a moment she stood absolutely still; then, with something very closely resembling her old repose of manner, she stooped again and quietly picked up the flowers still lying at her feet.

"Now," she said, quietly, "I must say what I've wanted to say all along. How does it feel to be a great man?" Her manner was controlled, she looked at him evenly and directly; save for the faint vibration in her voice there was nothing to indicate the tumult of a moment ago.



"HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A GREAT MAN?"

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But Loder was still uncertain. He caught her hand, his eyes searching hers.

"But Eve—" he began.

Then Eve played the last card in her mysterious game. Laughing quickly and nervously, she freed her hand and laid it over his mouth.

"No!" she said. "Not one word! All this past fortnight has belonged to you; now it's my turn. To-day is mine."