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By Katherine Cecil Thurston,
 Author of "The Circle," Etc.
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CHAPTER XXIII.

FOR awhile there was silence; then Loder, bitterly aware that he had conquered, poignantly conscious of the appeal that Eve's attitude made, found further endurance impossible. Gently freeing his hand, he moved away from her to the fireplace, taking up the position that she had first occupied.

"Eve," he said slowly, "I haven't finished yet. I haven't said everything. I'm going to tax your courage further."

With a touch of pained alarm, Eve lifted her head. "Further?" she said.

Loder shrank from the expression on her face. "Yes," he said with difficulty, "there's still another point to be faced. The matter doesn't end with my going back. To have the situation fully saved Chilcote must return—Chilcote must be brought to realize his responsibilities."

Eve's lips parted in dumb dismay. "It must be done," he went on hurriedly, "and we have got to do it—you and I." He turned and looked at her.

"? I could do nothing. What could I do?" Her voice failed.

"Everything," he said. "You could do everything. He is morally weak, but he has one sensitive point—the fear of a public exposure. Once make it plain to him that you know his secret and you can compel him to whatever course of action you select. It was to ask you to do this—to beg you to do this—that I came to you tonight. I know that it's demanding more than a woman's resolution—more than a woman's strength. But you are like no woman in the world!"

"Eve," he cried, with sudden vehemence, "can't you see that it's imperative—the one thing to save us both?"

He stopped abruptly as he had begun, and a painful silence filled the room. Then, as before, Eve moved instinctively toward him, but this time her steps were slow and uncertain. Nearing his side, she put out her hand as if for comfort and support and, feeling his fingers tighten round it, stood for a moment resting in the contact.

"I understand," she said at last very slowly. "I understand. When will you take me to him?"

For a moment Loder said nothing, not daring to trust his voice. Then he answered low and abruptly. "Now!" he said. "Now, at once! Now, this moment, if I may. And—remember that I know what it costs you."

As if imbued with fear that his courage might fail him, he suddenly released her hand, and crossing the room to where a long, dark cloak lay as she had thrown it on her return home, he picked it up, walked to her side and silently wrapped it about her. Then, still acting automatically, he moved to the door, opened it and stood aside while she passed out into the corridor.

In complete silence they descended the stairs and passed to the hall door. There Crapham, who had returned to his duties since Loder's entrance, came quickly forward with an offer of service.

But Loder dismissed him curtly, and with something of the confusion bred of Chilcote's regime, the man drew back toward the staircase.

With a hasty movement Loder stepped forward and opening the door admitted a breath of chill air. Then on the threshold he paused. It was his first sign of hesitation—the one instant in which nature rebelled against the conscience so tardily awakened. He stood motionless for a moment, and it is doubtful whether even Eve fully fathomed the bitterness of his re-annunciation—the blackness of the night that strobed before his eyes.

Behind him was everything; before him nothing. The everything symbolized by the luxurious house, the eagerly attentive servants, the pleasant atmosphere of responsibility; the nothing represented by the broad public thoroughfare, the passing figures, each unconscious of and uninterested in his existence. As an interloper he had entered this house; as an interloper—masquerader—he had played his part, lived his hour, proved himself; as an interloper he was now passing back into the dim world of unrealized hopes and unachieved ambitions.

He stood rigidly quiet, his strong figure silhouetted against the lighted hall, his face cold and set; then, with a touch of fatality, chance cut short his struggle.

An empty haunch wheeled around the corner of the square, the cabman, seeing him, raised his whip in query, and involuntarily he nodded an acquiescence. A moment later he had helped Eve into the cab.

"Middle Temple lane," he directed, pausing on the step.

"Middle Temple lane is opposite Clifford's inn," he explained as he took his place beside her. "When we get out there we have only to cross Fleet street."

Eve bent her head in token that she understood, and the cab moved out into the roadway.

Within a few minutes the neighborhood of Grosvenor square was exchanged for the noisier and more crowded one of Piccadilly, but either the cabman was overcautious or the horse was below the average, for they made but slow progress through the more crowded streets. To the two sitting in silence the pace was well nigh unbearable. With every added movement the tension grew. The methodical care with which they moved seemed like the tightening of a string already

strained to breaking point, yet neither spoke, because neither had the courage necessary for the words.

Once or twice as they traversed the Strand, Loder made a movement as if to break the silence, but nothing followed it. He continued to lean forward with a certain dogged stiffness, his clasped hands resting on the doors of the cab, his eyes staring straight ahead. Not once as they threaded their way did he dare to glance at Eve, though every movement, every stir of her garments, was forced upon his consciousness by his acutely awakened senses.

When at last they drew up before the dark archway of Middle Temple lane he descended hastily, and as he mechanically turned to protect Eve's dress from the wheel he looked at her fully for the first time since their enterprise had been undertaken. As he looked he felt his heart sink. He had expected to see the marks of suffering on her face, but the expression he saw suggested something more than mere mental pain.

All the rich color that usually deepened and softened the charm of her beauty had been erased as if by a long illness, and against the new pallor of her skin her blue eyes, her black hair and eyebrows seemed startlingly dark. A chill colder than remorse, a chill that bordered upon actual fear, touched Loder in that moment. With the first impulsive gesture he had allowed himself, he touched her arm.

"Eve," he began unsteadily. Then the word died off his lips.

Without a sound almost without a movement, she returned his glance, and something in her eyes checked what he might have said. In that one expressive look he understood all she had desired, all she had renounced—the full extent of the ordeal she had consented to and the motive that had compelled her consent. He drew back with the heavy sense that repentance and pity were equally futile—equally out of place.

Still in silence, she stepped to the pavement and stood aside while Loder dismissed the cab. To both there was something symbolic, something prophetic, in the dismissal. Without intention or almost without a sound, they drew closer together as the horse turned, its hoofs clattering on the roadway, its harness jingling, and still without realization, they looked after the vehicle as it moved away down the long, shadowed thoroughfare toward the lights and the crowds that they had left. At last involuntarily they turned toward each other.

"Come," Loder said abruptly. "It's only across the road."

Fleet street is generally very quiet once midnight is passed, and Eve had no need of guidance or protection as they crossed the pavement, shining like ice in the lamplight. They crossed it slowly, walking apart, for the dread of physical contact that had possessed them in the cab seemed to have fallen on them again.

Inquisitiveness has little place in the region of the city, and they gained the opposite footpath unnoted by the eavesdroppers. They still holding apart, they reached and entered Clifford's inn.

Inside the entrance they paused, and Eve shivered involuntarily. "How gray it is!" she said faintly. "And how cold! Like a graveyard."

Loder turned to her. For one moment control seemed to waver. His blood surged, his vision clouded. The sense that life and love were still within his reach filled him overwhelmingly. He turned toward Eve; he half extended his hands. Then, stirred by what impulse, moved by what instinct, it was impossible to say, he let them drop to his sides again.

"Come!" he said. "Come! This is the way. Keep close to me. Put your hand on my arm."

He spoke quietly, but his eyes were resolutely averted from her face as they crossed the dim, silent court.

Entering the room that led to his own rooms, he felt her fingers tremble on his arm, then he tightened in their pressure as the bare passage and cheerless stairs met her view, but he set his lips.

"Come!" he repeated in the same strained voice. "Come! It isn't far—three or four flights."

With a white face and a curious expression in her eyes Eve moved forward. She had released Loder's arm as they crossed the hall, and now, reaching the stairs, she put out her hand gropingly and caught the banister. She had a pained, numb sense of submission, of suffering that had sunk to apathy. Moving forward without resistance, she began to mount the stairs.

The ascent was made in silence. Loder went first, his shoulders braced, his head held erect. Eve, mechanically watchful of all his movements, followed a step or two behind. With weary monotony one flight of stairs succeeded another, each to her unaccustomed eyes seeming more colorless, more solitary, more desolate than the preceding one.

Then at last, with a sinking sense of apprehension, she realized that their goal was reached.

The knowledge broke sharply through her dulled senses, and, confronted by the closeness of her ordeal, she paused, her head lifted, her hand still nervous, grasping the banister. Her lips parted as if in sudden demand for aid, but in the nervous expectation, the pained apprehension of the moment, no sound escaped them. Loder, resolutely crossing the landing, knew nothing of the silent appeal.

For a second she stood hesitating; then her own weakness, her own shrinking dismay, were submerged in the interest of his movements. Slowly mounting the remaining steps, she followed him as if fascinated toward the door that showed dimly conspicuous in the light of an unshaded gas jet.

Almost at the moment that she reached his side he extended his hand toward the door. The action was decisive and hurried, as though he feared



"Chilcote is dead."

to trust himself.

For a space he fumbled with the lock. And Eve, standing close behind him, heard the audible creak and turn under his pressure. Then he shook the door.

At last, slowly, almost reluctantly, he turned round. "I'm afraid things aren't quite—quite right," he said in a low voice. "The door is locked, and I can see no light."

She raised her eyes quickly. "But you have a key?" she whispered. "Haven't you got a key?" It was obvious that to both the unexpected check to their designs was fraught with danger.

"Yes, but"—He looked toward the door. "Yes, I have a key. Yes, you're right," he added quickly. "I'll use it. Wait while I go inside."

Filled with a new nervousness, oppressed by the loneliness, the silence about her, Eve drew back obediently. The sense of mystery conveyed by the closed door weighed upon her. Her susceptibilities were tensely alert as she watched Loder search for his key and insert it in the lock. With mingled dread and curiosity she saw the door yield and gape open like a black gash in the dingy wall, and with a sudden sense of desertion she saw him pass through the aperture and heard him strike a match.

The wait that followed seemed extraordinarily long. Listening intently, she heard him move softly from one room to the other. And at last, to her acutely nervous susceptibilities, it seemed that he paused in absolute silence. In the intensity of listening she heard her own faint, irregular breathing, and the sound filled her with panic. The quiet, the solitude, the vague, instinctive apprehension, became suddenly unendurable. Then all at once the tension was relieved. Loder reappeared.

He paused for a second in the shadowed doorway; then he turned unsteadily, drew the door to and locked it.

Eve stepped forward. Her glimpse of him had been momentary—and she had not heard his voice—yet the consciousness of his bearing filled her with instinctive alarm. Abruptly and without reason her hands turned cold, her heart began to beat violently. "John!" she said below her breath.

For answer he moved toward her. His face was bereft of color; there was a look of consternation in his eyes. "Come," he said. "Come at once. I must take you home."

He spoke in a shaken, uneven voice.

Eve, looking up at him, caught his hand. "Why? Why?" she questioned. Her tone was low and scared.

Without replying he drew her impulsively toward the stairs. "Go very softly," he commanded. "No one must see you here."

In the first moment she obeyed him instinctively; then, reaching the head of the stairs, she stopped. With one hand still clasping his, the other clinging nervously to the banister, she refused to descend. "John," she whispered, "I'm not a child. What is it? What has happened? I must know."

For a moment Loder looked at her uncertainly; then, reading the expression in her eyes, he yielded to her demand.

"He's dead," he said in a very low voice. "Chilcote is dead."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TO fully appreciate a great announcement we must have time at our disposal. At the moment of Loder's disclosure time was denied to Eve, for scarcely had the words left his lips before the thought that dominated him asserted its prior claim. Blind to the incredulity in her eyes, he drew her swiftly forward and—half impelling, half supporting her—forced her to descend the stairs.

Never in after life could he obliterate the remembrance of that descent. Fear, such as he could never experience in his own concerns, possessed him. One desire overrode all others, the desire that Eve's reputation, which he himself had so nearly imperiled, should remain unimpaired. In the shadow of that urgent duty, the despair of the past hours, the appalling fact so lately realized, the future, with its possible trials, became dark to his imagination. In his new victory over self the question of her protection predominated.

Moving under his compulsion, he guided her hastily and silently down the deserted stairs, drawing a breath of deep relief as one after another the landings were successively passed, and, still actuated by the suppressed need of haste, he passed through the doorway that they had entered under such different conditions only a few minutes before.

(To be continued.)

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