

Lloyds of London

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he went up the stairs and rang the bell at the Stacy house. "I'm only half a man," he told himself bitterly. "I have been consciously rude to Stacy; I have a very poor opinion of him as a man and yet because I love his wife, I am low enough to accept his hospitality."

Lord Stacy was alone in the drawing room when Jonathan entered. He received his guest with charming courtesy and then stood back to watch Lady Clementine's face as she entered and ran to Jonathan with both hands outstretched; his glance shifted to Jonathan's eyes and what he saw there caused a covert little smile to creep for an infinitesimal instant over his cold, handsome face.

The little dinner, en famille, perfectly cooked and served, should have been a delight Jonathan. But it was not. Nor was it a delight to Elizabeth. Time after time the conversation became stilted, and languished, to be revived by one or the other with an effort. Both Elizabeth and Jonathan realized without bothering to analyze the feeling that Lord Stacy was distinctly de trop. Had he been forced to retire suddenly, with acute indigestion, they would have been delighted.

They had coffee in the drawing room. Shortly after serving it and retiring, the butler re-entered and handed Lord Stacy a note. He excused himself to read it and exclaimed testily:

"An important message from my uncle, Lord Drayton. He desires my presence immediately at the Admiralty. Devilish inconvenient, but I dare not disappoint him or disregard the old martinet's desires. My dear Mr. Blake, I am desolate at having to tear myself away so rudely. Please forgive me."

He hurried away. In about half an hour the door opened silently and the butler entered advanced to the open fire place and commenced stirring the coals. "Thank you, Cowles," Lady Stacy said coolly. "I shall not require your services until Mr. Blake is about to leave."

As the door closed behind the butler Lady Stacy said: "Be perfectly silent for five minutes, Jonathan, and keep your eyes on that door. The fire did not require the man's attention and well he knew it. He made it an excuse to enter with the stealth of a ghost."

Jonathan rose, placed himself just beside the door and waited. Presently the knob turned so slowly as to be almost unnoticeable even by one who might happen to be looking at it. The door opened an inch, so silently that Jonathan knew the hinges and lock had previously been well-oiled to obviate squeaks. Jonathan took his seat again and Lady Stacy went silently to the door, jerked it open suddenly and discovered Cowles with his ear to the crack between door and jamb. In a listening attitude, a pencil and pad of paper in his hand.

"You will pack your bags and

leave this house immediately," Lady Stacy informed the embarrassed fellow. "Leave your address with cook and a check for your wages will be sent you."

She closed the door and returned to her guest. "That is a fair sample of the life I lead with Lord Stacy," she informed Jonathan. "I had a suspicion when he left that the note from Lord Drayton had been written by himself. Now I know he has set the butler to spy upon us. Jonathan, we must be very, very careful. My husband is not above capitalizing a scandal against his own wife or his best friend."

"What ails the animal?" Jonathan asked lightly.

"Lack of funds. He has spent his own fortune, he is in the hands of money lenders and Lord Drayton will no longer permit him to sponge off him. The last of an inheritance left him by an aunt was lost at Lady Masham's gaming hall last

night and I have refused to listen further to his demands and pleadings for funds from my personal fortune. I have no intention of becoming an object of charity merely to humor the vices of a man I learned long ago to despise."

"If that were possible I love you more than ever, my dear, for your courage and common sense. I have cursed myself for coming here tonight. I shall not come again and that, of course, means that we shall not meet again."

Impulsively she came into his arms and commenced to weep. She was a very great lady, but she was also a woman and, like all of her sex, the conventions receded before the rush of her emotions. He

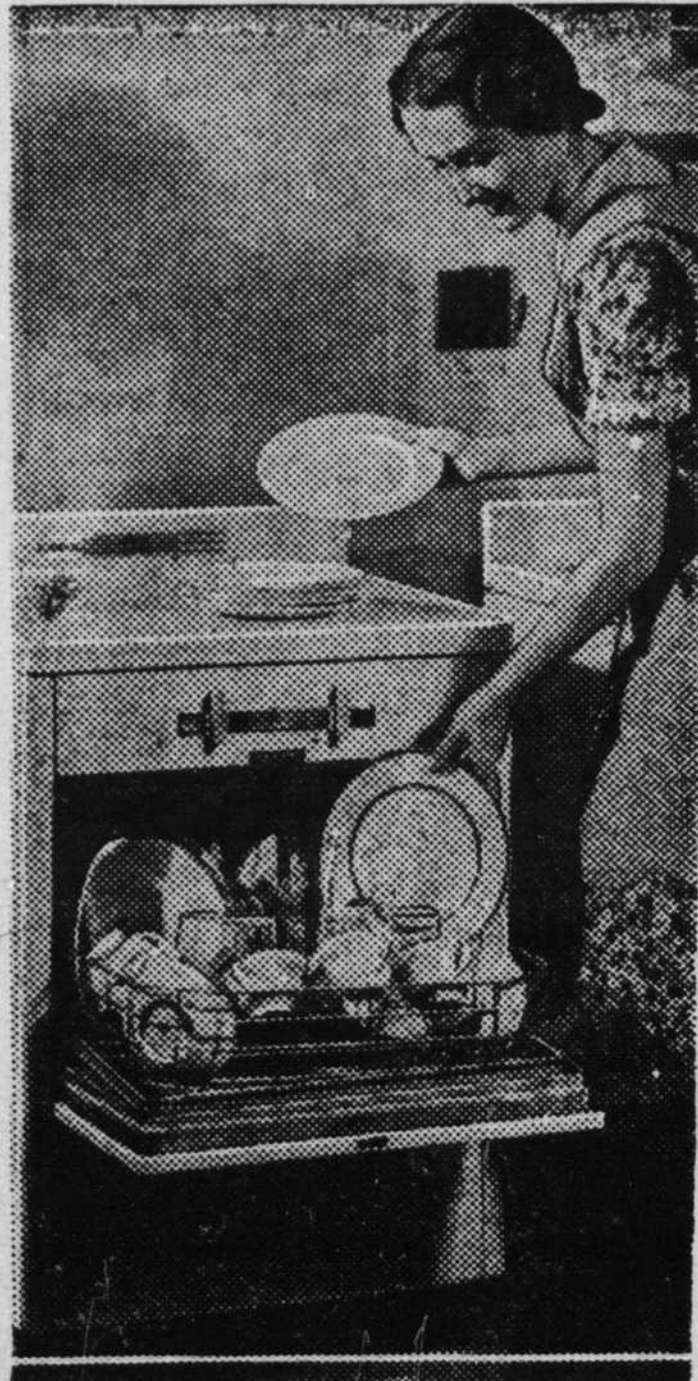
held her, with his cheek close to hers until her spasm of grief had passed; indeed, she was the first to recover her poise.

"No, you must not come here again," she decided. "That would be fatal. But I have an idea. Sir Thomas Lawrence starts tomorrow to paint my portrait. I shall be sitting for him thrice a week for the next month, and I shall let you know the day and the hours. Sir Thomas is a good friend of yours. He tells me that you call at his studio occasionally; that you had him paint a portrait of your patron, Mr. Angerstein. We might meet there—occasionally, my dear."

He kissed her, hungrily. What a clever woman she was!

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