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"No."

"Then you will send me your decision by wire tomorrow. I won't take your answer now."

Loder freed his arm abruptly. "Why not?" he asked.

Chilcote smiled nervously. "Because I know men—and men's temptations. We are all very strong till the quick is touched; then we all wince. It's morphia with one man, ambitions with another. In each case it's only a matter of sooner or later." He laughed in his satirical, unstrung way, and held out his hand. "You have my address," he said. "Au revoir."

Loder pressed the hand and dropped it. "Good-bye," he said, meaningly. Then he crossed the room quietly and held the door open. "Good-bye," he said again as the other passed him.

As he crossed the threshold, Chilcote paused. "Au revoir," he corrected, with emphasis.

Until the last echo of his visitor's steps had died away Loder stood with his hand on the door; then, closing it quietly, he turned and looked round the room. For a considerable space he stood there as if weighing the merits of each object; then very slowly he moved to one of the book-shelves, drew out May's *Parliamentary Practice*, and, carrying it to the desk, readjusted the lamp.

VI

ALL the next day Chilcote moved in a fever of excitement. Hot with hope one moment, cold with fever the next, he rushed with restless energy into every task that presented itself—only to drop it as speedily. Twice during the morning he drove to the entrance of Clifford's Inn, but each time his courage failed him and he returned to Grosvenor Square—to learn that the expected message from Loder had not come.

It was a wearing condition of mind; but at worst it was scarcely more than an exaggeration of what his state had been for months, and made but little obvious difference in his bearing or manner.

In the afternoon he took his place in the House, but, though it was his first appearance since his failure of two days ago, he drew but small personal notice. When he chose, his manner could repel advances with extreme effect, and of late men had been prone to draw away from him.

In one of the lobbies he encountered Fraide surrounded by a group of friends. With his usual furtive haste he would have passed on; but, moving away from his party, the old man accosted him. He was always courteously particular in his treatment of Chilcote, as the husband of his ward and godchild.

"Better, Chilcote?" he said, holding out his hand. At the sound of the low, rather formal tones, so

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characteristic of the old statesman, a hundred memories rose to Chilcote's mind, a hundred hours, distasteful in the living and unbearable in the recollection; and with them the new flash of hope, the new possibility of freedom. In a sudden rush of confidence he turned to his leader.

"I believe I've found a remedy for my nerves," he said. "I—I believe I'm going to be a new man." He laughed with a touch of excitement.

Fraide pressed his fingers kindly. "That is right," he said. "That is right. I called at Grosvenor Square this morning, but Eve told me your illness of the other day was not serious. She was very busy this morning—she could only spare me a quarter of an hour. She is indefatigable over the social side of your prospects, Chilcote. You owe her a large debt. A popular wife means a great deal to a politician."

The steady eyes of his companion disturbed Chilcote. He drew away his hand.

"Eve is unique," he said, vaguely.

Fraide smiled. "That is right," he said, again. "Admiration is too largely excluded from modern marriages." And with a courteous excuse he rejoined his friends.

It was dinner-time before Chilcote could desert the House, but the moment departure was possible he hurried to Grosvenor Square.

As he entered the house, the hall was empty. He swore irritably under his breath and pressed the nearest bell. Since his momentary exaltation in Fraide's presence, his spirits had steadily fallen, until now they hung at the lowest ebb.

As he waited in unconcealed impatience for an an-

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swer to his summons, he caught sight of his man Allsopp at the head of the stairs.

"Come here!" he called, pleased to find some one upon whom to vent his irritation. "Has that wire come for me?"

"No, sir. I inquired five minutes back."

"Inquire again."

"Yes, sir." Allsopp disappeared.

A second after his disappearance the bell of the hall door whizzed loudly.

Chilcote started. All sudden sounds, like all strong lights, affected him. He half moved to the door, then stopped himself with a short exclamation. At the same instant Allsopp reappeared.

Chilcote turned on him excitedly.

"What the devil's the meaning of this?" he said. "A battery of servants in the house and nobody to open the hall door!"

Allsopp looked embarrassed. "Crapham is coming directly, sir. He only left the hall to ask Jeffries—"

Chilcote turned. "Confound Crapham!" he exclaimed. "Go and open the door yourself."

Allsopp hesitated, his dignity struggling with his obedience. As he waited, the bell sounded again.

"Did you hear me?" Chilcote said.

"Yes, sir." Allsopp crossed the hall.

As the door was opened Chilcote passed his handkerchief from one hand to the other in the tension of hope and fear; then, as the sound of his own name in the shrill tones of a telegraph-boy reached his ears, he let the handkerchief drop to the ground.

Allsopp took the yellow envelope and carried it to his master.

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"A telegram, sir," he said. "And the boy wishes to know if there is an answer." Picking up Chilcote's handkerchief, he turned aside with elaborate dignity.

Chilcote's hands were so unsteady that he could scarcely insert his finger under the flap of the envelope. Tearing off a corner, he wrenched the covering apart and smoothed out the flimsy pink paper.

The message was very simple, consisting of but seven words:

"Shall expect you at eleven to-night.—LODER."

He read it two or three times, then he looked up. "No answer," he said, mechanically; and to his own ears the relief in his voice sounded harsh and unnatural.

Exactly as the clocks chimed eleven Chilcote mounted the stairs to Loder's rooms. But this time there was more of haste than of uncertainty in his steps, and, reaching the landing, he crossed it in a couple of strides and knocked feverishly on the door.

It opened at once, and Loder stood before him.

The occasion was peculiar. For a moment neither spoke; each involuntarily looked at the other with new eyes and under changed conditions. Each had assumed a fresh stand-point in the other's thought. The passing astonishment, the half-impersonal curiosity that had previously tinged their relationship, was cast aside, never to be reassumed. In each, the other saw himself—and something more.

As usual, Loder was the first to recover himself.

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"I was expecting you," he said. "Won't you come in?"

The words were almost the same as his words of the night before, but his voice had a different ring; just as his face, when he drew back into the room, had a different expression—a suggestion of decision and energy that had been lacking before. Chilcote caught the difference as he crossed the threshold, and for a bare second a flicker of something like jealousy touched him. But the sensation was fleeting.

"I have to thank you!" he said, holding out his hand. He was too well bred to show by a hint that he understood the drop in the other's principles. But Loder broke down the artifice.

"Let's be straight with each other, since everybody else has to be deceived," he said, taking the other's hand. "You have nothing to thank me for, and you know it. It's a touch of the old Adam. You tempted me, and I fell." He laughed, but below the laugh ran a note of something like triumph—the curious triumph of a man who has known the tyranny of strength and suddenly appreciates the freedom of a weakness.

"You fully realize the thing you have proposed?" he added, in a different tone. "It's not too late to retract, even now."

Chilcote opened his lips, paused, then laughed in imitation of his companion; but the laugh sounded forced.

"My dear fellow," he said at last, "I never retract."

"Never?"

"No."

"Then the bargain's sealed."

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Loder walked slowly across the room, and, taking up his position by the mantel-piece, looked at his companion. The similarity between them as they faced each other seemed abnormal, defying even the closest scrutiny. And yet, so mysterious is Nature even in her lapses, they were subtly, indefinably different. Chilcote was Loder deprived of one essential; Loder, Chilcote with that essential bestowed. The difference lay neither in feature, in coloring, nor in height, but in that baffling, illusive inner illumination that some call individuality, and others soul.

Something of this idea, misted and tangled by nervous imagination, crossed Chilcote's mind in that moment of scrutiny, but he shrank from it apprehensively.

"I—I came to discuss details," he said, quickly, crossing the space that divided him from his host. "Shall we—? Are you—?" He paused uneasily.

"I'm entirely in your hands." Loder spoke with abrupt decision. Moving to the table, he indicated a chair, and drew another forward for himself.

Both men sat down.

Chilcote leaned forward, resting elbows on the table. "There will be several things to consider—" he began, nervously, looking across at the other.

"Quite so." Loder glanced back appreciatively. "I thought about those things the better part of last night. To begin with, I must study your handwriting. I guarantee to get it right, but it will take a month."

"A month!"

"Well, perhaps three weeks. We mustn't make a mess of things."

Chilcote shifted his position.

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"Three weeks!" he repeated. "Couldn't you—?"

"No; I couldn't." Loder spoke authoritatively. "I might never want to put pen to paper, but, on the other hand, I might have to sign a check one day." He laughed. "Have you ever thought of that?—that I might have to, or want to, sign a check?"

"No. I confess that escaped me."

"You risk your fortune that you may keep the place it bought for you?" Loder laughed again. "How do you know that I am not a blackguard?" he added. "How do you know that I won't clear out one day and leave you high and dry? What is to prevent John Chilcote from realizing forty or fifty thousand pounds and then making himself scarce?"

"You won't do that," Chilcote said, with unusual decision. "I told you your weakness last night; and it wasn't money. Money isn't the rock you'll split over."

"Then you think I'll split upon some rock? But that's beyond the question. To get to business again. You'll risk my studying your signature?"

Chilcote nodded.

"Right! Now item two." Loder counted on his fingers. "I must know the names and faces of your men friends as far as I can. Your woman friends don't count. While I'm you, you will be adamant." He laughed again pleasantly. "But the men are essential—the backbone of the whole business."

"I have no men friends. I don't trust the idea of friendship."

"Acquaintances, then."

Chilcote looked up sharply. "I think we score there," he said. "I have a reputation for absent-

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mindfulness that will carry you anywhere. They tell me I can look through the most substantial man in the House as if he were gossamer, though I may have lunched with him the same day."

Loder smiled. "By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Fate must have been constructing this before either of us was born. It dovetails ridiculously. But I must know your colleagues—even if it's only to cut them. You'll have to take me to the House."

"Impossible!"

"Not at all!" Again the tone of authority fell to Loder. "I can pull my hat over my eyes and turn up my coat-collar. Nobody will notice me. We can choose the fall of the afternoon. I promise you 'twill be all right."

"Suppose the likeness should leak out? It's a risk."

Loder laughed confidently. "Tush, man! Risk is the salt of life. I must see you at your post, and I must see the men you work with." He rose, walked across the room, and took his pipe from the rack. "When I go in for a thing, I like to go in over head and ears," he added, as he opened his tobacco-jar.

His pipe filled, he resumed his seat, resting his elbows on the table in unconscious imitation of Chilcote.

"Got a match?" he said, laconically, holding out his hand.

In response Chilcote drew his match-box from his pocket and struck a light. As their hands touched, an exclamation escaped him.

"By Jove!" he said, with a fretful mixture of disappointment and surprise. "I hadn't noticed that!" His eyes were fixed in annoyed interest on Loder's extended hand.

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Loder, following his glance, smiled. "Odd that we should both have overlooked it! It clean escaped my mind. It's rather an ugly scar." He lifted his hand till the light fell more fully on it. Above the second joint of the third finger ran a jagged furrow, the reminder of a wound that had once laid bare the bone.

Chilcote leaned forward. "How did you come by it?" he asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, that's ancient history."

"The results are present-day enough. It's very awkward! Very annoying!" Chilcote's spirits, at all times overeasily played upon, were damped by this obstacle.

Loder, still looking at his hand, didn't seem to hear. "There's only one thing to be done," he said. "Each wear two rings on the third finger of the left hand. Two rings ought to cover it." He made a speculative measurement with the stem of his pipe.

Chilcote still looked irritable and disturbed. "I detest rings. I never wear rings."

Loder raised his eyes calmly. "Neither do I," he said. "But there's no reason for bigotry."

But Chilcote's irritability was started. He pushed back his chair. "I don't like the idea," he said.

The other eyed him amusedly. "What a queer beggar you are!" he said. "You waive the danger of a man signing your checks and shy at wearing a piece of jewelry. I'll have a fair share of individuality to study."

Chilcote moved restlessly. "Everybody knows I detest jewelry."

"Everybody knows you are capricious. It's got to be the rings or nothing, so far as I make out."

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Chilcote again altered his position, avoiding the other's eyes. At last, after a struggle with himself, he looked up.

"I suppose you're right!" he said. "Have it your own way." It was the first small, tangible concession to the stronger will.

Loder took his victory quietly. "Good!" he said. "Then it's all straight sailing?"

"Except for the matter of the—the remuneration." Chilcote hazarded the word uncertainly.

There was a faint pause, then Loder laughed brusquely. "My pay?"

The other was embarrassed. "I didn't want to put it quite like that."

"But that was what you thought. Why are you never honest—even with yourself?"

Chilcote drew his chair closer to the table. He did not attend to the other's remark, but his fingers strayed to his waistcoat pocket and fumbled there.

Loder saw the gesture. "Look here," he said, "you are overtaxing yourself. The affair of the pay isn't pressing; we'll shelve it to another night. You look tired out."

Chilcote lifted his eyes with a relieved glance. "Thanks. I do feel a bit fagged. If I may, I'll have that whiskey that I refused last night."

"Why, certainly." Loder rose at once and crossed to a cupboard in the wall. In silence he brought out whiskey, glasses, and a siphon of soda-water. "Say when!" he said, lifting the whiskey.

"Now. And I'll have plain water instead of soda, if it's all the same."

"Oh, quite." Loder recrossed the room. Instantly

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his back was turned, Chilcote drew a couple of tabloids from his pocket and dropped them into his glass. As the other came slowly back he laughed nervously.

"Thanks. See to your own drink now; I can manage this." He took the jug unceremoniously, and, carefully guarding his glass from the light, poured in the water with excited haste.

"What shall we drink to?" he said.

Loder methodically mixed his own drink and lifted the glass. "Oh, to the career of John Chilcote!" he answered.

For an instant the other hesitated. There was something prophetic in the sound of the toast. But he shook the feeling off and held up his glass.

"To the career of John Chilcote!" he said, with another unsteady laugh.