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things came to him in the moment of his entering the room, greeting Eve, and passing to the breakfast-table; then, while his eyes still rested contentedly on the pleasant array of china and silver, while his senses were still alive to the fresh, earthly scent of Eve's violets, the blow so long dreaded—so slow in coming—fell with accumulated force.

XXIV

THE letter through which the blow fell was not voluminous. It was written on cheap paper in a disguised hand, and the contents covered only half a page. Loder read it slowly, mentally articulating every word; then he laid it down, and as he did so he caught Eve's eyes raised in concern. Again he saw something of his own feelings reflected in her face, and the shock braced him; he picked up the letter, tearing it into strips.

"I must go out," he said, slowly. "I must go now—at once." His voice was hard.

Eve's surprised, concerned eyes still searched his. "Now—at once?" she repeated. "Now—without breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry." He rose from his seat, and, carrying the slips of paper across the room, dropped them into the fire. He did it, not so much from caution, as from an imperative wish to do something, to move, if only across the room.

Eve's glance followed him. "Is it bad news?" she asked, anxiously. It was unlike her to be insistent, but she was moved to the impulse by the peculiarity of the moment.

"No," he said shortly. "It's—business. This was written yesterday; I should have got it last night."

Her eyes widened. "But nobody does business at

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eight in the morning—" she began, in astonishment; then she suddenly broke off.

Without apology or farewell, Loder had left the fireplace and walked out of the room.

He passed through the hall hurriedly, picking up a hat as he went; and, reaching the pavement outside, he went straight forward until Grosvenor Square was left behind; then he ran. At the risk of reputation, at the loss of dignity, he ran until he saw a cab. Hailing it, he sprang inside, and, as the cabman whipped up and the horse responded to the call, he realized for the first time the full significance of what had occurred.

Realization, like the need for action, came to him slowly, but when it came it was with terrible lucidity. He did not swear as he leaned back in his seat, mechanically watching the stream of men on their way to business, the belated cars of green produce blocking the way between the Strand and Covent Garden. He had no use for oaths; his feelings lay deeper than mere words. But his mouth was sternly set and his eyes looked cold.

Outside the Law Courts he dismissed his cab and walked forward to Clifford's Inn. As he passed through the familiar entrance a chill fell on him. In the clear, early light it seemed more than ever a place of dead hopes, dead enterprises, dead ambitions. In the onward march of life it had been forgotten. The very air had a breath of unfulfilment.

He crossed the court rapidly, but his mouth set itself afresh as he passed through the door-way of his own house and crossed the bare hall.

As he mounted the well-known stairs, he received his first indication of life in the appearance of a cat from

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the second-floor rooms. At sight of him, the animal came forward, rubbed demonstratively against his legs, and with affectionate persistence followed him up-stairs.

Outside his door he paused. On the ground stood the usual morning can of milk—evidence that Chilcote was not yet awake or that, like himself, he had no appetite for breakfast. He smiled ironically as the idea struck him, but it was a smile that stiffened rather than relaxed his lips. Then he drew out the duplicate key he always carried, and, inserting it quietly, opened the door. A close, unpleasant smell greeted him as he entered the small passage that divided the bed and sitting rooms—a smell of whiskey mingling with the odor of stale smoke. With a quick gesture he pushed open the bedroom door; then on the threshold he paused, a look of contempt and repulsion passing over his face.

In his first glance he scarcely grasped the details of the scene, for the half-drawn curtains kept the light dim, but as his eyes grew accustomed to the obscurity he gathered their significance.

The room had a sleepless, jaded air—the room that under his own occupation had shown a rigid, almost monastic severity. The plain dressing-table was littered with cigarette ends and marked with black and tawny patches where the tobacco had been left to burn itself out. On one corner of the table a carafe of water and a whiskey-decanter rested one against the other, as if for support, and at the other end an overturned tumbler lay in a pool of liquid. The whole effect was sickly and nauseating. His glance turned involuntarily to the bed, and there halted.

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On the hard, narrow mattress, from which the sheets and blankets had fallen in a disordered heap, lay Chilcote. He was fully dressed in a shabby tweed suit of Loder's; his collar was open, his lip and chin unshaven; one hand was limply grasping the pillow, while the other hung out over the side of the bed. His face, pale, almost earthy in hue, might have been a mask, save for the slight convulsive spasms that crossed it from time to time, and corresponded with the faint, shivering starts that passed at intervals over his whole body. To complete his repellent appearance, a lock of hair had fallen loose and lay black and damp across his forehead.

Loder stood for a space shocked and spellbound by the sight. Even in the ghastly disarray, the likeness—the extraordinary, sinister likeness that had become the pivot upon which he himself revolved—struck him like a blow. The man who lay there was himself—bound to him by some subtle, inexplicable tie of similarity. As the idea touched him he turned aside and stepped quickly to the dressing-table; there, with unnecessary energy, he flung back the curtains and threw the window wide; then again he turned towards the bed. He had one dominant impulse—to waken Chilcote, to be free of the repulsive, inert presence that chilled him with so personal a horror. Leaning over the bed, he caught the shoulder nearest to him and shook it. It was not the moment for niceties, and his gesture was rough.

At his first touch Chilcote made no response—his brain, dulled by indulgence in his vice, had become a laggard in conveying sensations; but at last, as the pressure on his shoulder increased, his nervous system

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seemed suddenly to jar into consciousness. A long shudder shook him; he half lifted himself and then dropped back upon the pillow.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, in a trembling breath. "Oh!" The sound seemed drawn from him by compulsion.

Its uncanny tone chilled Loder anew. "Wake up, man!" he said, suddenly. "Wake up! It's I—Loder."

Again the other shuddered; then he turned quickly and nervously. "Loder?" he said, doubtfully. "Loder?" Then his face changed. "Good God!" he exclaimed, "what a relief!"

The words were so intense, so spontaneous and unexpected, that Loder took a step back.

Chilcote laughed discordantly, and lifted a shaky hand to protect his eyes from the light.

"It's—it's all right, Loder! It's all right! It's only that I—that I had a beastly dream. But, for Heaven's sake, shut that window!" He shivered involuntarily and pushed the lock of damp hair from his forehead with a weak touch of his old irritability.

In silence Loder moved back to the window and shut it. He was affected more than he would own even to himself by the obvious change in Chilcote. He had seen him moody, restless, nervously excited; but never before had he seen him entirely demoralized. With a dull feeling of impotence and disgust he stood by the closed window, looking unseeingly at the roofs of the opposite houses.

But Chilcote had followed his movements restlessly; and now, as he watched him, a flicker of excitement crossed his face. "God! Loder," he said, again, "'twas a relief to see you! I dreamed I was in hell—a horrible hell, worse than the one they preach about."

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He laughed to reassure himself, but his voice shook pitifully.

Loder, who had come to fight, stood silent and inert.

"It was horrible—beastly," Chilcote went on. "There was no fire and brimstone, but there was something worse. It was a great ironic scheme of punishment by which every man was chained to his own vice—by which the thing he had gone to pieces over, instead of being denied him, was made compulsory. You can't imagine it." He shivered nervously and his voice rose. "Fancy being satiated beyond the limit of satiety, being driven and dogged by the thing you had run after all your life!"

He paused excitedly, and in the pause Loder found resolution. He shut his ears to the panic in Chilcote's voice, he closed his consciousness to the sight of his shaken face. With a surge of determination he rallied his theories. After all, he had himself and his own interests to claim his thought. At the moment Chilcote was a wreck, with no desire towards rehabilitation; but there was no guarantee that in an hour or two he might not have regained control over himself, and with it the inclination that had prompted his letter of the day before. No; he had himself to look to. The survival of the fittest was the true, the only principle. Chilcote had had intellect, education, opportunity, and Chilcote had deliberately cast them aside. Fortifying himself in the knowledge, he turned from the window and moved slowly back to the bed.

"Look here," he began, "you wrote for me last night—" His voice was hard; he had come to fight.

Chilcote glanced up quickly. His mouth was drawn and there was a new anxiety in his eyes. "Loder!" he

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exclaimed, quickly. "Loder, come here! Come nearer!"

Reluctantly Loder obeyed. Stepping closer to the side of the bed, he bent down.

The other put up his hand and caught his arm. His fingers trembled and jerked. "I say, Loder," he said, suddenly, "I—I've had such a beastly night—my nerves, you know—"

With a quick, involuntary disgust Loder drew back. "Don't you think we might shove that aside?" he asked.

But Chilcote's gaze had wandered from his face and strayed to the dressing-table; there it moved feverishly from one object to another.

"Loder," he exclaimed, "do you see—can you see if there's a tube of tabloids on the mantel-shelf—or on the dressing-table?" He lifted himself nervously on his elbow and his eyes wandered uneasily about the room. "I—I had a beastly night; my nerves are horribly jarred; and I thought—I think—" He stopped.

With his increasing consciousness his nervous collapse became more marked. At the first moment of waking, the relief of an unexpected presence had surmounted everything else; but now, as one by one his faculties stirred, his wretched condition became patent. With a new sense of perturbation Loder made his next attack.

"Chilcote—" he began, sternly.

But again Chilcote caught his arm, plucking at the coat-sleeve. "Where is it?" he said. "Where is the tube of tabloids—the sedative? I'm—I'm obliged to take something when my nerves go wrong—" In his weakness and nervous tremor he forgot that Loder

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was the sharer of his secret. Even in his extremity his fear of detection clung to him limply—the lies that had become second nature slipped from him without effort. Then suddenly a fresh panic seized him; his fingers tightened spasmodically, his eyes ceased to rove about the room and settled on his companion's face. "Can you see it, Loder?" he cried. "I can't—the light's in my eyes. Can you see it? Can you see the tube?" He lifted himself higher, an agony of apprehension in his face.

Loder pushed him back upon the pillow. He was striving hard to keep his own mind cool, to steer his own course straight through the chaos that confronted him. "Chilcote," he began once more, "you sent for me last night, and I came the first thing this morning to tell you—" But there he stopped.

With an excitement that lent him strength, Chilcote pushed aside his hands. "God!" he said, suddenly, "suppose 'twas lost—suppose 'twas gone!" The imaginary possibility gripped him. He sat up, his face livid, drops of perspiration showing on his forehead, his whole shattered system trembling before his thought.

At the sight, Loder set his lips. "The tube is on the mantel-shelf," he said, in a cold, abrupt voice.

A groan of relief fell from Chilcote and the muscles of his face relaxed. For a moment he lay back with closed eyes; then the desire that tortured him stirred afresh. He lifted his eyelids and looked at his companion. "Hand it to me," he said, quickly. "Give it to me. Give it to me, Loder. Quick as you can! There's a glass on the table and some whiskey and

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water. The tabloids dissolve, you know—" In his new excitement he held out his hand.

But Loder stayed motionless. He had come to fight, to demand, to plead—if need be—for the one hour for which he had lived; the hour that was to satisfy all labor, all endeavor, all ambition. With dogged persistence he made one more essay.

"Chilcote, you wrote last night to recall me—" Once again he paused, checked by a new interruption. Sitting up again, Chilcote struck out suddenly with his left hand in a rush of his old irritability.

"Damn you!" he cried, suddenly, "what are you talking about? Look at me! Get me the stuff. I tell you it's imperative." In his excitement his breath failed and he coughed. At the effort his whole frame was shaken.

Loder walked to the dressing-table, then back to the bed. A deep agitation was at work in his mind.

Again Chilcote's lips parted. "Loder," he said, faintly—"Loder, I must—I must have it. It's imperative." Once more he attempted to lift himself, but the effort was futile.

Again Loder turned away.

"Loder—for God's sake—"

With a fierce gesture the other turned on him. "Good heavens! man—" he began. Then unaccountably his voice changed. The suggestion that had been hovering in his mind took sudden and definite shape. "All right!" he said, in a lower voice. "All right! Stay as you are."

He crossed to where the empty tumbler stood and hastily mixed the whiskey and water; then crossing to the mantel-piece where lay the small glass tube

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containing the tightly packed tabloids, he paused and glanced once more towards the bed. "How many?" he said, laconically.

Chilcote lifted his head. His face was pitifully drawn, but the feverish brightness in his eyes had increased. "Five," he said, sharply. "Five. Do you hear, Loder?"

"Five?" Involuntarily Loder lowered the hand that held the tube. From previous confidences of Chilcote's he knew the amount of morphia contained in each tabloid, and realized that five tabloids, if not an absolutely dangerous, was at least an excessive dose, even for one accustomed to the drug. For a moment his resolution failed; then the dominant note of his nature—the unconscious, fundamental egotism on which his character was based—asserted itself beyond denial. It might be reprehensible, it might even be criminal to accede to such a request, made by a man in such a condition of body and mind; yet the laws of the universe demanded self-assertion—prompted every human mind to desire, to grasp, and to hold. With a perception swifter than any he had experienced, he realized the certain respite to be gained by yielding to his impulse. He looked at Chilcote with his haggard, anxious expression, his eager, restless eyes; and a vision of himself followed sharp upon his glance. A vision of the untiring labor of the past ten days, of the slowly kindling ambition, of the supremacy all but gained. Then, as the picture completed itself, he lifted his hand with an abrupt movement and dropped the five tabloids one after another into the glass.

XXV

HAVING taken a definite step in any direction, it was not in Loder's nature to wish it retraced. His face was set, but set with determination, when he closed the outer door of his own rooms and passed quietly down the stairs and out into the silent court. The thought of Chilcote, his pitiable condition, his sordid environments, were things that required a firm will to drive into the background of the imagination; but a whole inferno of such visions would not have daunted Loder on that morning as, unobserved by any eyes, he left the little court-yard with its grass, its trees, its pavement—all so distastefully familiar—and passed down the Strand towards life and action.

As he walked, his steps increased in speed and vigor. Now, for the first time, he fully appreciated the great mental strain that he had undergone in the past ten days—the unnatural tension; the suppressed, but perpetual, sense of impending recall; the consequently high pressure at which work, and even existence, had been carried on. And as he hurried forward the natural reaction to this state of things came upon him in a flood of security and confidence—a strong realization of the temporary respite and freedom for which no price would have seemed too high. The moment for which he had unconsciously lived ever since Chilcote's first memorable proposition