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AS she finished speaking Eve did not lower her eyes. To her there was no suggestion of shame in her thoughts or her words; but to Loder, watching and listening, there was a perilous meaning contained in both.

"Thankfulness?" he repeated, slowly. From his newly stirred sense of responsibility pity and sympathy were gradually rising. He had never seen Eve as he saw her now, and his vision was all the clearer for the long oblivion. With a poignant sense of compassion and remorse, the knowledge of her youth came to him—the youth that some women preserve in the midst of the world, when circumstances have permitted them to see much but to experience little.

"Thankfulness?" he said again, incredulously.

A slight smile touched her lips. "Yes," she answered, softly. "Thankfulness that my trust had been rightly placed."

She spoke simply and confidently, but the words struck Loder more sharply than any accusation. With a heavy sense of bitterness and renunciation he moved slowly forward.

"Eve," he said, very gently, "you don't know what you say."

She had lowered her eyes as he came towards her; now again she lifted them in a swift, upward glance.

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For the first time since he had entered the room a slight look of personal doubt and uneasiness showed in her face. "Why?" she said. "I—I don't understand."

For a moment he answered nothing. He had found his first explanation overwhelming; now suddenly it seemed to him that his present difficulty was more impossible to surmount. "I came here to-night to tell you something," he began, at last, "but so far I have only said half—"

"Half?"

"Yes, half." He repeated the word quickly, avoiding the question in her eyes. Then, conscious of the need for explanation, he plunged into rapid speech.

"A fraud like mine," he said, "has only one safeguard, one justification—a boundless audacity. Once shake that audacity and the whole motive power crumbles. It was to make the audacity impossible—to tell you the truth and make it impossible—that I came to-night. The fact that you already knew made the telling easier—but it altered nothing."

Eve raised her head, but he went resolutely on.

"To-night," he said, "I have seen into my own life, into my own mind, and my ideas have been very roughly shaken into new places.

"We never make so colossal a mistake as when we imagine that we know ourselves. Months ago, when your husband first proposed this scheme to me, I was, according to my own conception, a solitary being vastly ill-used by Fate, who, with a fine stoicism, was leading a clean life. That was what I believed; but there, at the very outset, I deceived myself. I was simply a man who shut himself up because he cherished a grudge against life, and who lived honestly because

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he had a constitutional distaste for vice. My first feeling when I saw your husband was one of self-righteous contempt, and that has been my attitude all along. I have often marvelled at the flood of intolerance that has rushed over me at sight of him—the violent desire that has possessed me to look away from his weakness and banish the knowledge of it; but now I understand.

“I know now what the feeling meant. The knowledge came to me to-night. It meant that I turned away from his weakness because deep within myself something stirred in recognition of it. Humanity is really much simpler than we like to think, and human impulses have an extraordinary fundamental connection. Weakness is egotism—but so is strength. Chilcote has followed his vice; I have followed my ambition. It will take a higher judgment than yours or mine to say which of us has been the more selfish man.” He paused and looked at her.

She was watching him intently. Some of the meaning in his face had found a pained, alarmed reflection in her own. But the awe and wonder of the morning's discovery still colored her mind too vividly to allow of other considerations possessing their proper value. The thrill of exultation with which the misgivings born of Chilcote's vice had dropped away from her mental image of Loder was still too absorbing to be easily dominated. She loved, and as if by a miracle her love had been justified! For the moment the justification was all-sufficing. Something of confidence—something of the innocence that comes not from ignorance of evil but from a mind singularly uncontaminated—blinded her to the danger of her position.

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Loder, waiting apprehensively for some aid, some expression of opinion, became gradually conscious of this lack of realization. Moved by a fresh impulse, he crossed the small space that divided them and caught her hands.

“Eve,” he said, gently, “I have been trying to analyze myself and give you the results; but I sha'n't try any more; I shall be quite plain with you.

“From the first moment I took your husband's place I was ambitious. You unconsciously aroused the feeling when you brought me Fraide's message on the first night. You aroused it by your words—but more strongly, though more obscurely, by your underlying antagonism. On that night, though I did not know it, I took up my position—I made my determination. Do you know what that determination was?”

She shook her head.

“It was the desire to stamp out Chilcote's footmarks with my own—to prove that personality is the great force capable of everything. I forgot to reckon that when we draw largely upon Fate she generally extorts a crushing interest.

“First came the wish for your respect; then the desire to stand well with such men as Fraide—to feel the stir of emulation and competition—to prove myself strong in the one career I knew myself really fitted for. For a time the second ambition overshadowed the first, but the first was bound to reassert itself; and in a moment of egotism I conceived the notion of winning your enthusiasm as well as your respect—”

Eve's face, alert and questioning, suddenly paled as a doubt crossed her mind.

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"Then it was only—only to stand well with me?"

"I believed it was only the desire to stand well with you; I believed it until the night of my speech—if you can credit anything so absurd—then on that night, as I came up the stairs to the gallery and saw you standing there, the blindness fell away and I knew that I loved you." As he said the last words he released her hands and turned aside, missing the quick wave of joy and color that crossed her face.

"I knew it, but it made no difference; I was only moved to a higher self-glorification. I touched supremacy that night. But as we drove home I experienced the strangest coincidence of my life. You remember the block in the traffic at Piccadilly?"

Again Eve bent her head.

"Well, when I looked out of the carriage window to discover its cause the first man I saw was—Chilcote."

Eve started slightly. This swift, unexpected linking of Chilcote's name with the most exalted moment of her life stirred her unpleasantly. Some glimmering of Loder's intention in so linking it, broke through the web of disturbed and conflicting thoughts.

"You saw him on that night?"

"Yes; and the sight chilled me. It was a big drop from supremacy to the remembrance of—everything."

Involuntarily she put out her hand.

But Loder shook his head. "No," he said, "don't pity me! The sight of him came just in time. I had a reaction in that moment, and, such as it was, I acted on it. I went to him next morning and told him that the thing must end. But then—even then—I shirked being honest with myself. I had meant to tell him that it must end because I had grown to

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love you, but my pride rose up and tied my tongue. I could not humiliate myself. I put the case before him in another light. It was a tussle of wills—and I won; but the victory was not what it should have been. That was proved to-day when he returned to tell me of the loss of this telegram. It wasn't the fear that Lady Astrupp had found it; it wasn't to save the position that I jumped at the chance of coming back; it was to feel the joy of living, the joy of seeing you—if only for a day!" For one second he turned towards her, then as abruptly he turned away again.

"I was still thinking of myself," he said. "I was still utterly self-centred when I came to this room to-day and allowed you to talk to me—when I asked you to see me to-night as we parted at the club. I sha'n't tell you the thoughts that unconsciously were in my mind when I asked that favor. You must understand without explanation.

"I went to the theatre with Lady Astrupp ostensibly to find out how the land lay in her direction—really to heighten my self-esteem. But there Fate—or the power we like to call by that name—was lying in wait for me, ready to claim the first interest in the portion of life I had dared to borrow." He said this slowly, as if measuring each word. He did not glance towards Eve as he had done in his previous pause. His whole manner seemed oppressed by the gravity of what he had still to say.

"I doubt if a man has ever seen more in half an hour than I have to-night," he said. "I'm speaking of mental seeing, of course. In this play, 'Other Men's Shoes,' two men change identities—as Chilcote and I have done—but in doing so they overlook one fact—

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The fact that one of them has a wife! That's not my way of putting it; it's the way it was put to me by one of Lady Astrupp's party."

Again Eve looked up. The doubt and question in her eyes had grown unmistakably. As he ceased to speak her lips parted quickly.

"John," she said, with sudden conviction, "you're trying to say something—something that's terribly hard."

Without raising his head, Loder answered her. "Yes," he answered, "the hardest thing a man ever said—"

His tone was short, almost brusque, but to ears sharpened by instinct it was eloquent. Without a word Eve took a step forward, and, standing quite close to him, laid both hands on his shoulders.

For a space they stood silent, she with her face lifted, he with averted eyes. Then very gently he raised his hands and tried to unclasp her fingers. There was scarcely any color visible in his face, and by a curious effect of emotion it seemed that lines, never before noticeable, had formed about his mouth.

"What is it?" Eve asked, apprehensively. "What is it?"

By a swift, involuntary movement she had tightened the pressure of her fingers; and, without using force, it was impossible for Loder to unloose them. With his hands pressed irresolutely over hers, he looked down into her face.

"As I sat in the theatre to-night, Eve," he said, slowly, "all the pictures I had formed of life shifted. Without desiring it, without knowing it, my whole point of view was changed. I suddenly saw things by

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the world's search-light instead of by my own miserable candle. I suddenly saw things for you—instead of for myself."

Eve's eyes widened and darkened, but she said nothing.

"I suddenly saw the unpardonable wrong that I have done you—the imperative duty of cutting it short." He spoke very slowly, in a dull, mechanical voice.

Eve—her eyes still wide, her face pained and alarmed—withdrew her hands from his shoulders. "You mean," she said, with difficulty, "that it is going to end? That you are going away? That you are giving everything up? Oh, but you can't! You can't!" she exclaimed, with sudden excitement, her fears suddenly overmastering her incredulity. "You can't! You mustn't! The only proof that could have interfered—"

"I wasn't thinking of the proof."

"Then of what? Of what?"

Loder was silent for a moment. "Of our love," he said, steadily.

She colored deeply. "But why?" she stammered; "why? We have done no wrong. We need do no wrong. We would be friends—nothing more; and I—oh, I so need a friend!"

For almost the first time in Loder's knowledge of her, her voice broke, her control deserted her. She stood before him in all the pathos of her lonely girlhood—her empty life.

The revelation touched him with sudden poignancy; the real strength that lay beneath his faults, the chivalry buried under years of callousness, stirred at

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the birth of a new emotion. The resolution preserved at such a cost, the sacrifice that had seemed wellnigh impossible, all at once took on a different shape. What before had been a barren duty became suddenly a sacred right. Holding out his arms, he drew her to him as if she had been a child.

"Eve," he said, gently, "I have learned to-night how fully a woman's life is at the mercy of the world—and how scanty that mercy is. If circumstances had been different, I believe—I am convinced—I would have made you a good husband—would have used my right to protect you as well as a man could use it. And now that things are different, I want—I should like—" He hesitated a very little. "Now that I have no right to protect you—except the right my love gives—I want to guard you as closely from all that is sordid as any husband could guard his wife.

"In life there are really only two broad issues—right and wrong. Whatever we may say, whatever we may profess to believe, we know that our action is always a choice between right and wrong. A month ago—a week ago—I would have despised a man who could talk like this—and have thought myself strong for despising him. Now I know that strength is something more than the trampling of others into the dust that we ourselves may have a clear road; that it is something much harder and much less triumphant than that—that it is standing aside to let somebody else pass on. Eve," he exclaimed, suddenly, "I'm trying to do this for you. Don't you see? Don't you understand? The easy course, the happy course, would be to let things drift. Every instinct is calling to me to take that course—to go on as I have gone,

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trading on Chilcote's weakness and your generosity. But I won't do it! I can't do it!" With a swift impulse he loosed his arms and held her away from him. "Eve, it's the first time I have put another human being before myself!"

Eve kept her head bent. Painful, inaudible sobs were shaking her from head to foot.

"It's something in you—something unconscious—something high and fine, that holds me back—that literally bars the way. Eve, can't you see that I'm fighting—fighting hard?"

After he had spoken there was silence—a long, painful silence—during which Eve waged the battle that so many of her sex have waged before; the battle in which words are useless and tears of no account. She looked very slight, very young, very forlorn, as she stood there. Then, in the oppressive sense of waiting that filled the whole room, she looked up at him.

Her face was stained with tears, her thick, black lashes were still wet with them; but her expression, as her eyes met Loder's, was a strange example of the courage, the firmness, the power of sacrifice that may be hidden in a fragile vessel.

She said nothing, for in such a moment words do not come easily, but with the simplest, most submissive, most eloquent gesture in the world she set his perplexity to rest.

Taking his hand between hers, she lifted it and for a long, silent space held it against her lips.