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THE GRIP OF FEAR

MAURICE LEVEL

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FROM

Prof. Willis A. Boughton

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BY

MAURICE LEVEL

NEW YORK: MITCHELL KENNERLEY
1911

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Sept. 19 1925

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CONTENTS

		PAGE
I.	THE FIRST INSPIRATION	1
II.	29, BOULEVARD LANNES	37
III.	THE LAST MORNING OF ONESIMUS COCHE, REPORTER	54
IV.	THE FIRST NIGHT OF ONESIMUS COCHE, THE MURDERER	102
V.	A FEW POINTS OF DETAIL	119
VI.	"NOT KNOWN AT NO. 22"	138
VII.	TWELVE HOURS—6 P.M. TO 6 A.M.	160
VIII.	UNEASINESS	181
IX.	ANGUISH	201
X.	IN THE CLUTCHES OF DEATH	220

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THE GRIP OF FEAR

I

THE FIRST INSPIRATION

"SO that's settled," said Monsieur Ledoux, still standing on the doorstep; "the first night you are disengaged, you let me know, and come and dine?"

"All right; and thank you again for the delightful evening."

"Nonsense. The pleasure has been mine. . . . Wrap yourself up; it is quite cold to-night. You know the way? Down the Boulevard Lannes as far as the Avenue Henri-Martin. If you walk fast you may still catch the last train. . . . By the by, you ought to have a revolver. This isn't a very safe part of the town. . . ."

"Oh! that's all right; thank you, I have

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one. You know, I'm used to Paris after dark, and a journalist has to learn how to take care of himself. Don't come any further; the moonlight is so clear I can find my way perfectly. Good-bye. . . ."

Onesimus Coche crossed the pavement and started walking briskly down the middle of the boulevard; when he reached the first turning he heard his host's voice calling out cheerfully:

"Au revoir. Don't be long before you come again."

He turned round and replied:

"Indeed I won't. Good-night."

Monsieur Ledoux was still standing on the steps and waving his hand. From the passage behind him, all hung with andrinople and lit by a bright hall-lamp, came a shaft of rosy light.

There was a sense of homely comfort in the sight of the little sleepy garden and the small house with its closed shutters, revealed in that patch of light; and after the door was shut Onesimus Coche stood for a moment quite still, gazing back. Ten years of Paris life had

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not sufficed to make him altogether forget his early days spent in a distant provincial town, or the long winter evenings and the familiar silent streets, where in spring-time, when the sap is rising, you seem to hear the crackling of the wood in the eaves and in the beams of the old houses on either side. Without quite knowing why, his thoughts travelled back to the cosy home of his childhood and to the old people he loved, who must be fast asleep by this time. An easy, uneventful life like theirs might have been his own if some demon had not attracted him to this great city of Paris. He had never had much luck here, and, after throwing himself in the fray with the spirit of one born to conquer, he had had to content himself with reporting for a daily paper.

He lit his cigarette and went on, more slowly.

A comfortable dinner and good old vintage wine disposed his mind to hopeful dreams long since forgotten. There was no sound to break into his thought, no familiar noise of engines, or rustle of paper, or smell of ink and rags and fat such as fills the air in the printing room—

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and he seemed to see within reach of him, almost close at hand, the wonderful and fragile thing which he had learnt to despair of attaining—*glory!*

Once or twice before, as he sat with his elbows on the table, at a late hour, in a restaurant, under the flaring lights, amid the musty odours of food and the perfumes of women's toilettes, surrounded by constant movement and deafened by gipsy music, with dazed brain, with sight and hearing exasperated by the colours and the noise, he had experienced the same sudden and clear sense that he was "somebody," and that he had in himself the germ of great achievements. He had said to himself: "Ah! at this moment, if I had a pen, ink, and paper, I could write something immortal." Alas! at these mysterious times, when another self seems to spring into being and to transform the old self, the pen, the ink, and the paper are never at hand. . . .

And so now, in the stillness of the winter night, under the sharp caress of the wind, thoughts and memories played, as it were, vainly in this man's soul.

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Suddenly came the stroke of the hour: that sound at which all dreaming is dispelled.

"Bother!" he said, "half-past twelve; I have missed the last train. I'll be hanged if I can find a cab in this God-forsaken hole!"

He quickened his pace. The boulevard stretched endlessly before him, bounded on the left by small houses and on the right by the round, heavy mass of the fortifications. Here and there the street lamps cast their yellow light upon the pavement; nothing else had even the semblance of life, on this road, as it lay between the sleeping houses and little bands of grass and rows of leafless trees that did not even shiver in the night. There was something awe-inspiring in this absolute stillness and this unchanging silence. . . .

As he passed by the bastion occupied by the Army Police, Onesimus Coche slackened his pace and cast a glance in the direction of the sentry-box: it was empty. He walked on, skirting the wall. Behind the railing lay the courtyard, white with a clear whiteness, only broken here and there by the tiny black shadows of the pebbles. From the stables came

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the rattling of the halters and the pawing of a horse in its box.

These sounds freed Onesimus Coche from the vague sense of anguish which had oppressed him since his father's door had closed upon him; and Onesimus Coche, the dreamer and the poet, vanished. There remained only Onesimus Coche, the indefatigable reporter, ready to start off at a moment's notice and to "interview," with the same self-assurance and the same cold smile, the explorer just back from the North Pole, and the porter who "thought he had seen the murderer go by." . . .

His cigarette had gone out. He took another from his pocket and stopped to light it. He was about to walk on when he saw three shadows advancing fast towards him along the railings. At any other time he would not even have troubled to look; but the lateness of the hour, the loneliness of this spot, and some strange instinct fixed his attention on them. Drawing back in the shadow of a tree, he stood watching.

At a later time he remembered that during this second, which was to mean so much in his

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life, his senses were strangely sharpened. His eyes pierced the night, aware of a thousand details; his ear detected the slightest rustling. Although he was by nature courageous and even foolhardy, yet now he put his hand on his revolver and was relieved by the sense of security which it gave him to play with the trigger. A thousand confused thoughts crossed his brain. He saw quite clearly before his mind's eye things which had slept within him for years. For a few seconds he knew the anguish of the man in extremity of peril, who lives his whole life over again between one heart-beat and the next. He felt the awful and distinct warning of present, immediate danger, and was conscious of the desperate effort of the human machine by which muscles, senses and reason attain their maximum perfection for the defence of the whole man.

The shadows glided on, halting suddenly, then starting off again, advancing by quick, irregular bounds. Within a few steps of him they slackened their pace and stopped; and, by the light of the street-lamp, Coche took

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in every detail of their appearance and watched their every movement.

They were a woman and two men. The smaller man carried in his arms a large bundle wrapped up in blue rags. The woman turned her head to right and left, listening. As if fearing the presence of some invisible witness, the man with the bundle and the woman drew back out of the circle of light. The other man did not move at first; then he made a step forward and, with his hands over his eyes, leaned against the lamp-post. He had a truly sinister aspect. His face was white and drawn, with sunken cheeks; and he pressed both large hands convulsively across it. A glistening lock of black hair fell over his forehead. Some blood had dripped between his fingers and over his moustache and lip and down over his cheek and neck on to his shirt-collar.

"Well," said the woman in a half-whisper, "what are you waiting for?"

He murmured: "It hurts. *Bon Dieu!*"

She came out of the shade and went up to him. The small man followed her, put down

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his bundle, and murmured, shrugging his shoulders:

"What a fuss!"

"I should like to see *you* if you'd got what I have! There, look!"

He drew away his bloodstained hands. Under his matted hair was an enormous gash slashing his forehead open from right to left with a deep, gaping, bleeding wound. It severed the eyebrow, and the eyelid below it was so dark and swollen that you could scarcely see, as it opened and closed, a suspicion of a small dark thing, also covered with blood—the eye.

The woman, moved to pity, took her handkerchief and very gently sponged the wound. Then, as the blood, clotted for a moment, began to flow again, she tore the bundle open, and took some rags from it with which to dress the cut. The wounded man, clenching his teeth, and stamping his foot, held out his brutish face. The other one growled: "Don't undo the parcel!"

"Well, upon my word!" said the woman,

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turning her head, but still holding her hands over the wound.

The smaller man knelt down and made up the parcel again as best he could, twisting some projecting gold article. Then he got up, with his bundle under his arm, and waited. Only, when the other one's gash was dressed and the woman was about to wipe her hands on her apron, he said to her, looking her straight in the eyes:

"Hear, stop that! You don't wipe that sort of thing off; you *wash* it off! D'you hear?"

The trio started off again in the shadow and continued their way, close to the walls, without a word, running on tip-toe. Suddenly a branch fell on the pavement at their heels; they turned round with a start, all three like one man, fists clenched and head down. Coche caught one last glimpse of the red hair of the woman, the twisted mouth of the small man, and the horrible wounded face of the other, half hidden by the blood-stained rags. Then they bounded on, reached the grass by the fort, and were lost in the darkness. And Coche, who had known all the time the danger in which he stood, and

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at one moment had said to himself, "If they see me I am a dead man," breathed freely. He let go his revolver, which he had not ceased from fingering during the whole scene, and, sure of being really alone, he began to think.

First of all he reflected how right his friend Ledoux had been in saying that this was not a safe place; and with the thought came into his mind a favourite saying of his, one which he had very often used as a striking close for his articles: "Our police service is thoroughly inefficient."

He considered what course of action to take, and decided to hurry back to the Avenue Henri-Martin. Why? For the mere pleasure, without profit or glory, of getting a stab in the back? Without knowing why, he started in that direction. But he had not walked four steps before his reporter's instinct —the instinct, as it were, of an amateur detective—gained the upper hand, and he came to a sudden standstill.

"The incomparable trio which I have just met," said he to himself, "are, I am sure, fresh from some crime. Of what kind? Was it

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armed assault, or simply burglary? The wound of the first man seems to point to assault. . . . But the bulky package of the other one seems to prove conclusively that burglary is their trade. Road thieves robbing the belated passer-by can find at best money, papers, and jewellery—not a cumbersome load. People do not walk about carrying table silver and fancy articles; and, unless I am much mistaken, I saw some gold and silver in that bundle. I saw the face of a clock, too, and when the man put down the bundle I heard a jingle like that of table silver. As for the wound. . . . A quarrel over the sharing of the booty? . . . A fall against some hard and cutting body—the marble of a mantelpiece, or the glass of a door? . . . Quite likely. . . . In any case, burglary seems evident. And, if so, I have two alternatives. I can either retrace my steps full speed and try to follow the trail of the rascals; or else try to find the house into which they have broken. I have lost a full ten minutes, and by now the fellows are a good way off. Even supposing that I find them, alone against three I can do little; besides, it

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is not my business to capture them: we have paid agents for that. On the other hand, the task of finding out more about this mysterious business does certainly tempt my fancy. No one can have yet discovered the theft. I know exactly where the three came from, for my sight is good for three hundred yards, even in this light: I must have seen the shadows at about that distance away; from the moment I saw them the two men and the woman did not stop till they reached this lamp; I can therefore cover three hundred yards without hesitation. After that I will consider."

He started on his way without haste, turning round from time to time to see what distance he had covered. His step was about twenty-five inches. He counted four hundred steps and stopped. From that moment he stood on the possible scene of their action. If the theft had taken place before the Avenue Henri-Martin, he was quite sure he would find some traces of the three. He found himself before a small, closed garden-door. At the bottom of the garden was a house, and a light

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showing behind the closed shutters. Coche did not even halt.

Everywhere the same stillness; not a trace could be detected of anything abnormal. He was beginning to despair when, happening to rest his hand on a door, he felt the door give way.

He raised his eyes; the house was dark and silent, and he thought its silence abnormally deep. However, he shrugged his shoulders and murmured to himself: "What now? What trick is my imagination playing on me, just when I need all my presence of mind? . . . And yet, why is this door not closed?"

The door had flown wide open. Onesimus saw the little garden with carefully-tended flower-beds, the earth neatly raked, and the light sand on the path, which seemed golden under the caress of the moon. A strange hesitation came over him, so marked that he decided to go in. . . . The whole thing was only a romance, so he began to think. The burglars were no doubt honest workmen returning home . . . they had perhaps been attacked by robbers. . . . After all, what had they said that

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could justify his suspicions? Their whole demeanour was mysterious and sinister. But what of that? If some one were to see him now, appearing suddenly out of the darkness, would not even he look very startling?

The drama was becoming comic opera. True, the bundle must be accounted for; . . . but what if it only contained an alarum and some scraps of old tin? . . .

Night is a strange counsellor. It transforms objects and beings by casting on them fantastic shadows which the sun disperses. Fear, the handmaid of the Evil One, changes everything, making romances out of nothing—and foolish, childish romances at that. None of us knows exactly at what moment she enters into possession of our souls. She works there sometimes for hours while we still think that we are perfectly self-possessed; we think—*I* want this, *I* want that. . . . But Fear is all the time the real mistress in us. She has sat herself down sovereign and triumphant. We are altogether in her power; her grip seems to hold our throat. . . . Soon even our pride is conquered; a great shudder seizes and shakes

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us; with a strange, desperate effort we try to escape from her hold—in vain: the bravest confess themselves conquered first. Dark, indeed, is the moment when we murmur the fatal words—I am afraid! But for hours our teeth have been chattering without our daring to recognise it.

Onesimus Coche took a step back and said aloud to himself: "You're frightened, old boy."

He waited a moment, trying to analyse the exact impression that the words made upon himself. Not a muscle in his body twitched. His hands remained quite still in his pockets; he did not even experience the fleeting surprise usually caused by the sound of one's own voice out of the silence. He looked straight before him. Then suddenly he started; on the yellow sand of the path he had detected some footprints, outlined by a tiny shade, here quite separate and distinct, there covered one by another. He came back to the door, knelt down and picked up a little of the soil. It was dry sand, so fine and light that the slightest touch of wind would

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disperse it. He half-opened his fingers and watched the sand fall, as light as powder. Suddenly all his doubts vanished, and with them all his theories on Fear and on the fantastic images that Fear may weave. His mind had never been clearer, he had never felt calmer than he did at this moment. His brain acted like a good workman who has put the last fashioning touch to his work, and now takes up the finished article with a steady hand, raises it to the level of his eye, and sees that it is complete and perfect.

He pulled himself together. All that for a moment had seemed to him an empty fancy now became in his mind more than probable—*sure*—fact. This which he had found was exact evidence. He abandoned hypothesis for a tangible proof which his imagination could no longer transform. From one deduction to another—they were strictly *logical* deductions this time—he reached the exact point which his instinct had reached long before. He thought:

"Somebody has trodden on the sand of this path; this must have been done quite recently, for the footprints are clear, and to-night's

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breeze would have dispersed them in an hour or two. Those men and the woman passed by this place. No one except themselves can have stepped over the threshold of this house. The key to the mystery lies, then, behind these silent walls in the darkness of the closely-shuttered rooms."

Some invisible power pushed him forward.

He went in.

He advanced very cautiously, taking care not to tread over the footprints which he had seen. Although he knew that the slightest gust of wind might efface them at any moment, he was too conscious of their importance to destroy them himself. Without a thought the burglars had left, as it were, their personal seal; the merest tyro in the detective's art could not fail to take stock of these traces, and to avail himself of them for his inquiry. Coche could remember a thousand sensational cases in which much slighter indices had served as valuable clues: the story, for instance, of the criminal who was traced several years after his crime through a forgotten boot. And now he marvelled that his mind was so clear and so

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quick after all the hesitation which had possessed him before; his reason seemed to have abdicated in favour of a kind of superior instinct which not only guided the boldest of his inductions, but also directed his slightest movement.

Thus, after walking barely ten steps, he arrived at the door of the house. He who a moment ago would have been quite unnerved by the thought of meeting a shadow or a face, he who for a while had not dared to formulate his suspicions even to himself, now felt not the least surprise on finding that the door opened easily when he turned the handle. And yet, from the point of view of common sense, surely it was less surprising that the people of the house should have forgotten to shut the gate rather than the hall door. A gate, at the best of times, presents only a very slight difficulty for any one wishing to pass in; and the first comer could with no effort have got on to that particular garden wall and let himself down noiselessly into the garden. But a hall door can afford a protection enough to make it worth while to fasten it securely before re-

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tiring for the night. This very simple course of reasoning did not even occur to Coche; any more than did the fear of being himself taken for a burglar, and received as such.

Nevertheless, when he heard the echo of his own steps in the corridor, he stopped for a moment. He fumbled in his pocket for a match: his box was empty! He murmured: "Can't be helped," and took out his revolver. And then he went on, groping with his arms out and his hands open, guiding himself by the contact with a very cold wall, so damp that it felt sticky to the touch. Suddenly this guide failed him, and he was left groping in empty space. He put out one foot, then the next; it fell upon something softer than the stone flags in the corridor. He bent down and felt with his hands; there was a step, and then a carpet, agreeable to the touch after the dampness of the wall. He straightened himself and put his hand on the bannister; the wood creaked. Scarcely knowing how he did it, without stopping to inquire why, he was on his way to the first floor. He made no attempt at inspecting the ground floor first. He started

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to climb the stairs. He counted twelve steps; then came a small landing, and he began to feel along the wall again; there was still nothing but a smooth surface. He went on climbing; he counted up twelve steps again, and after these he felt the ground flat before him: this was the next floor of the house—the way was open. Now he must try to discover something of his whereabouts, and—more important still, if he wanted to avoid being killed—he must announce his presence.

The owner, or owners, of this house must be sleeping very soundly, thought Coche, if they had not heard his footsteps before now. The stairs had creaked many times under his feet. Even the door, notwithstanding his precautions, had creaked when he shut it. Who could tell whether there wasn't a man standing silently somewhere ready to spring upon him, and perhaps to fire? By his present procedure he risked no less than his life. He therefore said, very softly so as not to frighten any one:

"Any one there?"

No answer.

He repeated a little louder:

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"Is any one there?"

After a short pause he added:

"Don't be afraid; open. . . ."

No answer.

"Upon my word," thought he, "they are sleeping soundly in here, and no mistake!—I had not thought of that. It makes it much more awkward. However, I don't mean to get myself maimed just for the love of my art."

He thought a moment, and then said, very loudly:

"Open! It's the Police."

The sound of that word "Police" made him smile. Whatever had made him think of announcing himself as the Police? Onesimus Coche in the Police! Onesimus Coche, who spent his whole time collecting instances of Police mismanagement, poking fun at the agents of law and order; *he* was now reduced to appropriating their title! It was rather a joke.

The Police (and this time he could not help laughing outright) were far from having any thought of him or of the burglars! At that very moment, a good way off from the place

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where he stood, two very sleepy policemen were pacing up and down the law-abiding thoroughfares, with their hoods drawn up and their hands in their pockets. At the police-stations, near a rumbling stove, amid a smell of pipes, of hot plaster, of wet linen and leather, other policemen, astride of wooden benches, were playing manilla with those rough, greasy cards that cling to one's fingers—just waiting to collar some belated pickpocket, or the milk-man caught in the act of "baptizing" his goods —that was all the Police were good for!—Indeed, he, Onesimus Coche, was now what the Police ought always to be—the vigilant and faithful, skilful and resolute guardian, effectively watching over the safety of the virtuous. What a comparison! what a lesson! . . . He could just *see* the article he would write next day; and he rejoiced at the thought of how it would make the Police authorities feel.

He, a mere journalist, would teach them their trade! The article should have a sensational head-line; it would commence with something striking, continue with something unexpected. . . . What an article it should be!

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But the magic word—"the Police"—remained unanswered like the rest. Not a whisper broke the majestic silence of the place. Coche bethought him that his trick had failed and that he still stood in considerable danger. One thing, however, reassured him. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he began, little by little, to distinguish the things around him, and soon saw a faint glimmer of light a few steps in front of him. He walked forward and found himself by a window. A thin ray of moonlight peeped in through a chink in the closed shutters. Between the bars of the French blinds he saw a little strip of garden and another darker strip that must be the boulevard. But he did not stop to enjoy the pleasure of the moonlight or of the few stars that besprinkled the sky. Nothing was less suited to his fiery temperament than this silence and the slow, cautious manner of advance which he had been forced to adopt. He had been by turns patient, crafty, timid, almost cowardly. . . . But there is an end to all things. He had come into this house to *learn* something, and he was going to learn it.

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He turned about, put his hand up to the wall, went on, groping, more boldly. At last he came upon a door; then he took hold of the handle, pulling it towards himself to make sure that nobody could open suddenly from the inside, and he shouted rather than said:

"Steady! Don't be afraid and don't shoot!"

He counted three, and then, receiving no answer, he plunged into the room. He expected to be met by resistance; on the contrary, carried too far by his own impetus, he fell face forward and struck his forehead against something hard. He put out his hand to save himself; and in so doing he knocked against a chair, which fell with a great clatter upon the floor.

"This time," he said, "with all this noise, they *must* hear me at last."

But when the crash had subsided, still no sound was heard—not a whisper came through the night, not a breath reached his ear.

"Hullo," he thought, "the burglars were better prepared than I was. The cage is empty, and they knew; they did their business in perfect comfort. That's why they did not

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even shut the doors after them, as well-trained workmen would. That's how I got in so easily."

There was an electric switch by his hand; he turned the light on. It burst out on a large room, for a moment overpowering and blinding Coche's tired eyes. When at last he was able to look, his glance fell upon a sight so unforeseen and so horrible that Coche felt his hair stand on end and was scarcely able to restrain a shriek of wild terror.

The place was in a state of mad disorder. A cupboard stood wide open on one side of the room, showing disordered piles of linen, and sheets half fallen from the shelves as if they were torn, all covered with red blotches. The drawers stood open, and one could see that the papers and old clothes and old boxes that now littered the floor had been kept in there. Near the curtain, on the wall hung with some light-coloured material, was spread the print of a red hand, with all the fingers stretched open and wide apart. The glass over the mantelpiece, cracked from top to bottom, was broken in the middle; and a few

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splinters of glass lay sparkling on the floor. On the dressing-table rag-ends of clothes and pieces of string, and crumpled-up envelopes were scattered untidily. The red-tinged water which filled the basin had overflowed, and pools of the same colour lay on the white marble slab. A crumpled-up towel bore traces of blood. Everything was pillaged, everything was red. Coche's feet treading upon the carpet made a sound like the crunching of sand on the sea-shore when the tide is rising. Last of all, lying across the bed, with his arms crossed, gripping the neck of a bottle, pieces of which had cut into his hand, was stretched an old man with his throat cut open from ear to chest-bone by a horrible gash. The blood had welled out on to the pillows, the sheets, the walls, and the furniture in a violent outrush. In the crude light, in the horrible silence, this room where everything was red, where everywhere blood had set its seal, looked no longer like a room, but like a charnel-house.

Onesimus Coche saw the whole with one horrified glance, and his terror was such that he was obliged to lean against the wall, or he

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would have fallen, then to summon all his self-command, or he would have fled. A hot wave rushed to his face, he was shaken by a long shudder, and an icy sweat broke out over his body.

He had before now looked upon many terrible sights—out of curiosity, or by chance, or by reason of his profession, yet never had he felt a horror like this; for never until now had he come upon such a spectacle without knowing what he was about to see, or at least realising that he was about to see "something." Besides, on all other occasions he had had the companionship of other men, sustaining his courage and overcoming his loathing by that human contact which gives courage to the most faint-hearted. This was the first time that he had found himself unexpectedly and alone in the presence of death. . . . And of what a death! . . .

He straightened himself. The broken mirror reflected his likeness before him; he looked ghastly pale, with deep black rings round his eyes; his dry lips were half-opened by a fearful, convulsive smile, and on his forehead,

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