

X

IN the days that followed Fraide's marked adoption of him Loder behaved with a discretion that spoke well for his qualities. Many a man placed in the same responsible, and yet strangely irresponsible, position might have been excused if, for the time at least, he gave himself a loose rein. But Loder kept free of the temptation.

Like all other experiments, his showed unlooked-for features when put to a working test. Its expected difficulties smoothed themselves away, while others, scarcely anticipated, came into prominence. Most notable of all, the physical likeness between himself and Chilcote, the bedrock of the whole scheme, which had been counted upon to offer most danger, worked without a hitch. He stood literally amazed before the sweeping credulity that met him on every hand. Men who had known Chilcote from his youth, servants who had been in his employment for years, joined issue in the unquestioning acceptance. At times the ease of the deception bewildered him; there were moments when he realized that, should circumstances force him to a declaration of the truth, he would not be believed. Human nature prefers its own eyesight to the testimony of any man.

But in face of this astonishing success he steered a steady course. In the first exhilaration of Fraide's

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favor, in the first egotistical wish to break down Eve's scepticism, he might possibly have plunged into the vortex of action, let it be in what direction it might; but fortunately for himself, for Chilcote, and for their scheme, he was liable to strenuous second thoughts—those wise and necessary curbs that go further to the steadying of the universe than the universe guesses. Sitting in the quiet of the House, on the same day that he had spoken with Eve on the Terrace, he had weighed possibilities slowly and cautiously. Impressed to the full by the atmosphere of the place that in his eyes could never lack character, however dull its momentary business, however prosy the voice that filled it, he had sifted impulse from expedience, as only a man who has lived within himself can sift and distinguish. And at the close of that first day his programme had been formed. There must be no rush, no headlong plunge, he had decided; things must work round. It was his first expedition into the new country, and it lay with fate to say whether it would be his last.

He had been leaning back in his seat, his eyes on the ministers opposite, his arms folded in imitation of Chilcote's most natural attitude, when this final speculation had come to him; and as it came his lips had tightened for a moment and his face become hard and cold. It is an unpleasant thing when a man first unconsciously reckons on the weakness of another, and the look that expresses the idea is not good to see. He had stirred uneasily; then his lips had closed again. He was tenacious by nature, and by nature intolerant of weakness. At the first suggestion of reckoning upon Chilcote's lapses, his mind had drawn back in disgust; but as the thought came again the disgust had lessened.

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In a week—two weeks, perhaps—Chilcote would reclaim his place. Then would begin the routine of the affair. Chilcote, fresh from indulgence and freedom, would find his obligations a thousand times more irksome than before; he would struggle for a time; then—

A shadowy smile had touched Loder's lips as the idea formed itself.

Then would come the inevitable recall; then in earnest he might venture to put his hand to the plough. He never indulged in day-dreams, but something in the nature of a vision had flashed over his mind in that instant. He had seen himself standing in that same building, seen the rows of faces first bored, then hesitatingly transformed under his personal domination, under the one great power he knew himself to possess—the power of eloquence. The strength of the suggestion had been almost painful. Men who have attained self-repression are occasionally open to a perilous onrush of feeling. Believing that they know themselves, they walk boldly forward towards the high-road and the pitfall alike.

These had been Loder's disconnected ideas and speculations on the first day of his new life. At four o'clock on the ninth day he was pacing with quiet confidence up and down Chilcote's study, his mind pleasantly busy and his cigar comfortably alight, when he paused in his walk and frowned, interrupted by the entrance of a servant.

The man came softly into the room, drew a small table towards the fire, and proceeded to lay an extremely fine and unserviceable-looking cloth.

Loder watched him in silence. He had grown to find silence a very useful commodity. To wait and

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let things develop was the attitude he oftenest assumed. But on this occasion he was perplexed. He had not rung for tea, and in any case a cup on a salver satisfied his wants. He looked critically at the fragile cloth.

Presently the servant departed, and solemnly re-entered carrying a silver tray, with cups, a teapot, and cakes. Having adjusted them to his satisfaction, he turned to Loder.

"Mrs. Chilcote will be with you in five minutes, sir," he said.

He waited for some response, but Loder gave none. Again he had found the advantages of silence, but this time it was silence of a compulsory kind. He had nothing to say.

The man, finding him irresponsive, retired; and, left to himself, Loder stared at the array of feminine trifles; then, turning abruptly, he moved to the centre of the room.

Since the day they had talked on the Terrace, he had only seen Eve thrice, and always in the presence of others. Since the night of his first coming, she had not invaded his domain, and he wondered what this new departure might mean.

His thought of her had been less vivid in the last few days; for, though still using steady discretion, he had been drawn gradually nearer the fascinating whirlpool of new interests and new work. Shut his eyes as he might, there was no denying that this moment, so personally vital to him, was politically vital to the whole country; and that by a curious coincidence Chilcote's position well-nigh forced him to take an active interest in the situation. Again and again the suggestion had arisen that—should the smouldering

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fire in Persia break into a flame, Chilcote's commercial interests would facilitate, would practically compel, his standing in in the campaign against the government.

The little incident of the tea-table, recalling the social side of his obligations, had aroused the realization of greater things. As he stood meditatively in the middle of the room he saw suddenly how absorbed he had become in these greater things. How, in the swing of congenial interests, he had been borne insensibly forward—his capacities expanding, his intelligence asserting itself. He had so undeniably found his sphere that the idea of usurpation had receded gently as by natural laws, until his own personality had begun to color the day's work.

As this knowledge came, he wondered quickly if it held a solution of the present little comedy; if Eve had seen what others, he knew, had observed—that Chilcote was showing a grasp of things that he had not exhibited for years. Then, as a sound of skirts came softly down the corridor, he squared his shoulders with his habitual abrupt gesture and threw his cigar into the fire.

Eve entered the room much as she had done on her former visit, but with one difference. In passing Loder she quietly held out her hand.

He took it as quietly. "Why am I so honored?" he said.

She laughed a little and looked across at the fire. "How like a man! You always want to begin with reasons. Let's have tea first and explanations after." She moved forward towards the table, and he followed. As he did so, it struck him that her dress seemed in peculiar harmony with the day and the room, though

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beyond that he could not follow its details. As she paused beside the table he drew forward a chair with a faint touch of awkwardness.

She thanked him and sat down.

He watched her in silence as she poured out the tea, and the thought crossed his mind that it was incredibly long since he had seen a woman preside over a meal. The deftness of her fingers filled him with an unfamiliar, half-inquisitive wonder. So interesting was the sensation that, when she held his cup towards him, he didn't immediately see it.

"Don't you want any?" She smiled a little.

He started, embarrassed by his own tardiness. "I'm afraid I'm dull," he said. "I've been so—"

"So keen a worker in the last week?"

For a moment he felt relieved. Then, as a fresh silence fell, his sense of awkwardness returned. He sipped his tea and ate a biscuit. He found himself wishing, for almost the first time, for some of the small society talk that came so pleasantly to other men. He felt that the position was ridiculous. He glanced at Eve's averted head, and laid his empty cup upon the table.

Almost at once she turned, and their eyes met.

"John," she said, "do you guess at all why I wanted to have tea with you?"

He looked down at her. "No," he said, honestly and without embellishment.

The curtness of the answer might have displeased another woman. Eve seemed to take no offence.

"I had a talk with the Fraides to-day," she said. "A long talk. Mr. Fraide said great things of you—things I wouldn't have believed from anybody but

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Mr. Fraide." She altered her position and looked from Loder's face back into the fire.

He took a step forward. "What things?" he said. He was almost ashamed of the sudden, inordinate satisfaction that welled up at her words.

"Oh, I mustn't tell you!" She laughed a little. "But you have surprised him." She paused, sipped her tea, then looked up again with a change of expression.

"John," she said, more seriously, "there is one point that sticks a little. Will this great change last?" Her voice was direct and even—wonderfully direct for a woman, Loder thought. It came to him with a certain force that beneath her remarkable charm might possibly lie a remarkable character. It was not a possibility that had occurred to him before, and it caused him to look at her a second time. In the new light he saw her beauty differently, and it interested him differently. Heretofore he had been inclined to class women under three heads—idols, amusements, or encumbrances; now it crossed his mind that a woman might possibly fill another place—the place of a companion.

"You are very sceptical," he said, still looking down at her.

She did not return his glance. "I think I have been made sceptical," she said.

As she spoke the image of Chilcote shot through his mind. Chilcote, irritable, vicious, unstable, and a quick compassion for this woman so inevitably shackled to him followed it.

Eve, unconscious of what was passing in his mind, went on with her subject.

"When we were married," she said, gently, "I had

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such a great interest in things, such a great belief in life. I had lived in politics, and I was marrying one of the coming men—everybody said you were one of the coming men—I scarcely felt there was anything left to ask for. You didn't make very ardent love," she smiled, "but I think I had forgotten about love. I wanted nothing so much as to be like Lady Sarah—married to a great man." She paused, then went on more hurriedly: "For a while things went right; then slowly things went wrong. You got your—your nerves."

Loder changed his position with something of abruptness.

She misconstrued the action.

"Please don't think I want to be disagreeable," she said, hastily. "I don't. I'm only trying to make you understand why—why I lost heart."

"I think I know," Loder's voice broke in involuntarily. "Things got worse—then still worse. You found interference useless. At last you ceased to have a husband."

"Until a week ago." She glanced up quickly. Absorbed in her own feelings, she had seen nothing extraordinary in his words.

But at hers, Loder changed color.

"It's the most incredible thing in the world," she said. "It's quite incredible, and yet I can't deny it. Against all my reason, all my experience, all my inclination I seem to feel in the last week something of what I felt at first." She stopped with an embarrassed laugh. "It seems that, as if by magic, life has been picked up where I dropped it six years ago." Again she stopped and laughed.

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Loder was keenly uncomfortable, but he could think of nothing to say.

"It seemed to begin that night I dined with the Fraides," she went on. "Mr. Fraide talked so wisely and so kindly about many things. He recalled all we had hoped for in you; and—and he blamed me a little." She paused and laid her cup aside. "He said that when people have made what they call their last effort, they should always make just one effort more. He promised that if I could once persuade you to take an interest in your work, he would do the rest. He said all that, and a thousand other kinder things—and I sat and listened. But all the time I thought of nothing but their uselessness. Before I left I promised to do my best—but my thought was still the same. It was stronger than ever when I forced myself to come up here—" She paused again, and glanced at Loder's averted head. "But I came, and then—as if by conquering myself I had compelled a reward, you seemed—you somehow seemed different. It sounds ridiculous, I know." Her voice was half amused, half deprecating. "It wasn't a difference in your face, though I knew directly that you were free from—nerves." Again she hesitated over the word. It was a difference in yourself, in the things you said, more than in the way you said them." Once more she paused and laughed a little.

Loder's discomfort grew.

"But it didn't affect me then." She spoke more slowly. "I wouldn't admit it then. And the next day when we talked on the Terrace I still refused to admit it—though I felt it more strongly than before. But I have watched you since that day, and I know

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there is a change. Mr. Fraide feels the same, and he is never mistaken. I know it's only nine or ten days, but I've hardly seen you in the same mood for nine or ten hours in the last three years." She stopped, and the silence was expressive. It seemed to plead for confirmation of her instinct.

Still Loder could find no response.

After waiting for a moment, she leaned forward in her chair and looked up at him.

"John," she said, "is it going to last? That's what I came to ask. I don't want to believe till I'm sure; I don't want to risk a new disappointment." Loder felt the earnestness of her gaze, though he avoided meeting it.

"I couldn't have said this to you a week ago, but to-day I can. I don't pretend to explain why—the feeling is too inexplicable. I only know that I can say it now, and that I couldn't a week ago. Will you understand—and answer?"

Still Loder remained mute. His position was horribly incongruous. What could he say? What dared he say?

Confused by his silence, Eve rose.

"If it's only a phase, don't try to hide it," she said. "But if it's going to last—if by any possibility it's going to last—" She hesitated and looked up.

She was quite close to him. He would have been less than man had he been unconscious of the subtle contact of her glance, the nearness of her presence—and no one had ever hinted that manhood was lacking in him. It was a moment of temptation. His own energy, his own intentions, seemed so near; Chilcote and Chilcote's claims so distant and unreal. After all,

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his life, his ambitions, his determinations, were his own. He lifted his eyes and looked at her.

"You want me to tell you that I will go on?" he said.

Her eyes brightened; she took a step forward. "Yes," she said, "I want it more than anything in the world."

There was a wait. The declaration that would satisfy her came to Loder's lips, but he delayed it. The delay was fateful. While he stood silent the door opened and the servant who had brought in the tea reappeared.

He crossed the room and handed Loder a telegram. "Any answer, sir?" he said.

Eve moved back to her chair. There was a flush on her cheeks and her eyes were still alertly bright.

Loder tore the telegram open, read it, then threw it into the fire.

"No answer!" he said, laconically.

At the brusqueness of his voice, Eve looked up. "Disagreeable news?" she said, as the servant departed.

He didn't look at her. He was watching the telegram withering in the centre of the fire.

"No," he said at last, in a strained voice. "No. Only news that I—that I had forgotten to expect."

XI

THERE was a silence—an uneasy break—after Loder spoke. The episode of the telegram was, to all appearances, ordinary enough, calling forth Eve's question and his own reply as a natural sequence; yet in the pause that followed it each was conscious of a jar, each was aware that in some subtle way the thread of sympathy had been dropped, though to one the cause was inexplicable and to the other only too plain.

Loder watched the ghost of his message grow whiter and thinner, then dissolve into airy fragments and flutter up the chimney. As the last morsel wavered out of sight, he turned and looked at his companion.

"You almost made me commit myself," he said. In the desire to hide his feelings his tone was short.

Eve returned his glance with a quiet regard, but he scarcely saw it. He had a stupefied sense of disaster; a feeling of bitter self-commiseration that for the moment outweighed all other considerations. Almost at the moment of justification the good of life had crumbled in his fingers, the soil given beneath his feet, and with an absence of logic, a lack of justice unusual in him, he let resentment against Chilcote sweep suddenly over his mind.

Eve, still watching him, saw the darkening of his expression, and with a quiet movement rose from her chair.