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principle are but words to a headstrong man. The full significance of his position came to him as it had never come before. His hand closed on hers; he bent towards her, his pulses beating unevenly.

"Eve!" he said. Then at sound of his voice he suddenly hesitated. It was the voice of a man who has forgotten everything but his own existence.

For an instant he stayed motionless; then very quietly he drew away from her, releasing her hands.

"No," he said. "No—I haven't got the right."

XVIII

THAT night, for almost the first time since he had adopted his dual rôle, Loder slept ill. He was not a man over whom imagination held any powerful sway—his doubts and misgivings seldom ran to speculation upon future possibilities; nevertheless, the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, he had adopted a new attitude towards Eve came home to him with unpleasant force during the hours of darkness; and long before the first hint of daylight had slipped through the heavy window-curtains he had arranged a plan of action—a plan wherein, by the simple method of altogether avoiding her, he might soothe his own conscience and safeguard Chilcote's domestic interests.

It was a satisfactory if a somewhat negative arrangement, and he rose next morning with a feeling that things had begun to shape themselves. But chance sometimes has a disconcerting knack of forestalling even our best-planned schemes. He dressed slowly, and descended to his solitary breakfast with the pleasant sensation of having put last night out of consideration by the turning over of a new leaf; but scarcely had he opened Chilcote's letters, scarcely had he taken a cursory glance at the morning's newspaper, than it was borne in upon him that not only a new leaf, but a whole sheaf of new leaves, had been turned in his prospects—by a hand infinitely more powerful and

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arbitrary than his own. He realized within the space of a few moments that the leisure Eve might have claimed, the leisure he might have been tempted to devote to her, was no longer his to dispose of—being already demanded of him from a quarter that allowed of no refusal.

For the first rumbling of the political earthquake that was to shake the country made itself audible beyond denial on that morning of March 27th, when the news spread through England that, in view of the disorganized state of the Persian army and the Shah's consequent inability to suppress the open insurrection of the border tribes in the north-eastern districts of Meshed, Russia, with a great show of magnanimity, had come to the rescue by despatching a large armed force from her military station at Merv across the Persian frontier to the seat of the disturbance.

To many hundreds of Englishmen who read their papers on that morning this announcement conveyed but little. That there is such a country as Persia we all know, that English interests predominate in the south and Russian interests in the north we have all superficially understood from childhood; but in this knowledge, coupled with the fact that Persia is comfortably far away, we are apt to rest content. It is only to the eyes that see through long-distance glasses, the minds that regard the present as nothing more nor less than an inevitable link joining the future to the past, that this distant, debatable land stands out in its true political significance.

To the average reader of news the statement of Russia's move seemed scarcely more important than

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had the first report of the border risings in January, but to the men who had watched the growth of the disturbance it came charged with portentous meaning. Through the entire ranks of the opposition, from Fraide himself downward, it caused a thrill of expectation—that peculiar prophetic sensation that every politician has experienced at some moment of his career.

In no member of his party did this feeling strike deeper root than in Loder. Imbued with a lifelong interest in the Eastern question, specially equipped by personal knowledge to hold and proclaim an opinion upon Persian affairs, he read the signs and portents with instinctive insight. Seated at Chilcote's table, surrounded by Chilcote's letters and papers, he forgot the breakfast that was slowly growing cold, forgot the interests and dangers, personal or pleasurable, of the night before, while his mental eyes persistently conjured up the map of Persia, travelling with steady deliberation from Merv to Meshed, from Meshed to Herat, from Herat to the empire of India! For it was not the fact that the Hazaras had risen against the Shah that occupied the thinking mind, nor was it the fact that Russian and not Persian troops were destined to subdue them, but the deeply important consideration that an armed Russian force had crossed the frontier and was encamped within twenty miles of Meshed—Meshed, upon which covetous Russian eyes have rested ever since the days of Peter the Great.

So Loder's thoughts ran as he read and reread the news from the varying political stand-points, and so they continued to run when, some hours later, an urgent

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telephone message from the *St. George's Gazette* asked him to call at Lakely's office.

The message was interesting as well as imperative, and he made an instant response. The thought of Lakely's keen eyes and shrewd enthusiasms always possessed strong attractions for his own slower temperament, but even had this impetus been lacking, the knowledge that at the *St. George's* offices, if anywhere, the true feelings of the party were invariably voiced would have drawn him without hesitation.

It was scarcely twelve o'clock when he turned the corner of the tall building, but already the keen spirit that Lakely everywhere diffused was making itself felt. Loder smiled to himself as his eyes fell on the day's placards with their uncompromising headings, and passed onward from the string of gayly painted carts drawn up to receive their first consignment of the paper to the troop of eager newsboys passing in and out of the big swing-doors with their piled-up bundles of the early edition; and with a renewed thrill of anticipation and energy he passed through the doorway and ran up-stairs.

Passing unchallenged through the long corridor that led to Lakely's office, he caught a fresh impression of action and vitality from the click of the tape machines in the subeditors' office, and a glimpse through the open door of the subeditors themselves, each occupied with his particular task; then*without time for further observation he found himself at Lakely's door. Without waiting to knock, as he had felt compelled to do on the one or two previous occasions that business had brought him there, he immediately turned the handle and entered the room.

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Editors' offices differ but little in general effect. Lakely's surroundings were rather more elaborate than is usual, as became the dignity of the oldest Tory evening paper, but the atmosphere was unmistakable. As Loder entered he glanced up from the desk at which he was sitting, but instantly returned to his task of looking through and marking the pile of early evening editions that were spread around him. His coat was off and hung on the chair behind him, and he pulled vigorously on a long cigar.

"Hullo! That's right," he said, laconically. "Make yourself comfortable half a second, while I skim the *St. Stephen's*."

His salutation pleased Loder. With a nod of acquiescence he crossed the office to the brisk fire that burned in the grate.

For a minute or two Lakely worked steadily, occasionally breaking the quiet by an unintelligible remark or a vigorous stroke of his pencil. At last he dropped the paper with a gesture of satisfaction and leaned back in his chair.

"Well," he said, "what d'you think of this? How's this for a complication?"

Loder turned round. "I think," he said, quietly, "that we can't overestimate it."

Lakely laughed and took a long pull at his cigar. "And we mustn't be afraid to let the Sefborough crowd know it, eh?" He waved his hand to the poster of the first edition that hung before his desk.

Loder, following his glance, smiled.

Lakely laughed again. "They might have known it all along, if they'd cared to deduce," he said. "Did they really believe that Russia was going to sit calm-

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ly looking across the Heri-Rud while the Shah played at mobilizing? But what became of you last night? We had a regular prophesying of the whole business at Bramfell's; the great Fraide looked in for five minutes. I went on with him to the club afterwards and was there when the news came in. 'Twas a great night!"

Loder's face lighted up. "I can imagine it," he said, with an unusual touch of warmth.

Lakely watched him intently for a moment. Then with a quick action he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk.

"It's going to be something more than imagination for you, Chilcote," he said, impressively. "It's going to be solid earnest!" He spoke rapidly and with rather more than his usual shrewd decisiveness; then he paused to see the effect of his announcement.

Loder was still studying the flaring poster. At the other's words he turned sharply. Something in Lakely's voice, something in his manner, arrested him. A tinge of color crossed his face.

"Reality?" he said. "What do you mean?"

For a further space his companion watched him; then with a rapid movement he tilted back his chair.

"Yes," he said. "Yes; old Fraide's instincts are never far out. He's quite right. You're the man!"

Still quietly, but with a strange underglow of excitement, Loder left the fire, and, coming forward, took a chair at Lakely's desk.

"Do you mind telling me what you're driving at?" he asked, in his old, laconic voice.

Lakely still scrutinized him with an air of brisk satisfaction; then with a gesture of finality he tossed his cigar away.

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"My dear chap," he said, "there's going to be a breach somewhere—and Fraide says you're the man to step in and fill it! You see, five years ago, when things looked lively on the Gulf and the Bundar Abbas business came to light, you did some promising work; and a reputation like that sticks to a man—even when he turns slacker! I won't deny that you've slacked abominably," he added, as Loder made an uneasy movement, "but slacking has different effects. Some men run to seed, others mature. I had almost put you down on the black list, but I've altered my mind in the last two months."

Again Loder stirred in his seat. A host of emotions were stirring in his mind. Every word wrung from Lakely was another stimulus to pride, another subtle tribute to the curious force of personality.

"Well?" he said. "Well?"

Lakely smiled. "We all know that Sefborough's ministry is—well, top-heavy," he said. "Sefborough is building his card house just a story too high. It's a toss-up what 'll upset the balance. It might be the army, of course, or it might be education; but it might quite as well be a matter of foreign policy!"

They looked at each other in comprehensive silence.

"You know as well as I that it's not the question of whether Russia comes into Persia, but the question of whether Russia goes out of Persia when these Hazaras are subdued! I'll lay you what you like, Chilcote, that within one week we hear that the risings are suppressed, but that Russia, instead of retiring, has *advanced* those tempting twenty miles and comfortably ensconced herself at Meshed—as she ensconced herself on the island of Ashurada. Lakely's

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nervous, energetic figure was braced, his light-blue eyes brightened, by the intensity of his interest.

"If this news comes before the Easter recess," he went on, "the first nail can be hammered in on the motion for adjournment. And if the right man does it in the right way, I'll lay my life 'twill be a nail in Sefborough's coffin."

Loder sat very still. Overwhelming possibilities had suddenly opened before him. In a moment the unreality of the past months had become real; a tangible justification of himself and his imposture was suddenly made possible. In the stress of understanding he, too, leaned forward, and, resting his elbows on the desk, took his face between his hands.

For a space Lakely made no remark. To him man and man's moods came second in interest to his paper and his party politics. That Chilcote should be conscious of the glories he had opened up seemed only natural; that he should show that consciousness in a becoming gravity seemed only right. For some seconds he made no attempt to disturb him; but at last his own irrepressible activity made silence unendurable. He caught up his pencil and tapped impatiently on the desk.

"Chilcote," he said, quickly and with a gleam of sudden anxiety, "you're not by any chance doubtful of yourself?"

At sound of his voice Loder lifted his face; it was quite pale again, but the energy and resolution that had come into it when Lakely first spoke were still to be seen.

"No, Lakely," he said, very slowly, "it's not the sort of moment in which a man doubts himself."

XIX

AND so it came about that Loder was freed from one responsibility to undertake another. From the morning of March 27th, when Lakely had expounded the political programme in the offices of the *St. George's Gazette*, to the afternoon of April 1st he found himself a central figure in the whirlpool of activity that formed itself in Conservative circles.

With the acumen for which he was noted, Lakely had touched the key-stone of the situation on that morning; and succeeding events, each fraught with its own importance, had established the precision of his forecast.

Minutely watchful of Russia's attitude, Fraide quietly organized his forces and strengthened his position with a statesmanlike grasp of opportunity; and to Loder the attributes displayed by his leader during those trying days formed an endless and absorbing study. Setting the thought of Chilcote aside, ignoring his own position and the risks he daily ran, he had fully yielded to the glamour of the moment, and in the first freedom of a loose rein he had given unreservedly all that he possessed of activity, capacity, and determination to the cause that had claimed him.

Singularly privileged in a constant, personal contact with Fraide, he learned many valuable lessons of tact