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

and organization in those five vital days during which the tactics of a whole party hung upon one item of news from a country thousands of miles away. For should Russia subdue the insurgent Hazaras and, laden with the honors of the peacemaker, retire across the frontier, then the political arena would remain undisturbed; but should the all-important movement predicted by Lakely become an accepted fact before Parliament rose for the Easter recess, then the first blow in the fight that would rage during the succeeding session must inevitably be struck. In the mean time it was Fraide's difficult position to wait and watch and yet preserve his dignity.

It was early in the afternoon of March 29th that Loder, in response to a long-standing invitation, lunched quietly with the Fraides. Being delayed by some communications from Wark, he was a few minutes late in keeping his appointment, and on being shown into the drawing-room found the little group of three that was to make up the party already assembled—Fraide, Lady Sarah—and Eve. As he entered the room they ceased to speak, and all three turned in his direction.

In the first moment he had a vague impression of responding suitably to Lady Sarah's cordial greeting; but he knew that immediately and unconsciously his eyes turned to Eve, while a quick sense of surprise and satisfaction passed through him at sight of her. For an instant he wondered how she would mark his avoidance of her since their last eventful interview; then instantly he blamed himself for the passing doubt. For, before all things, he knew her to be a woman of the world.

He took Fraide's outstretched hand; and again he looked towards Eve, waiting for her to speak.

She met his glance, but said nothing. Instead of speaking she smiled at him—a smile that was far more reassuring than any words, a smile that in a single second conveyed forgiveness, approbation, and a warm, almost tender sense of sympathy and comprehension. The remembrance of that smile stayed with him long after they were seated at table; and far into the future the remembrance of the lunch itself, with its pleasant private sense of satisfaction, was destined to return to him in retrospective moments. The delightful atmosphere of the Fraides' home life had always been a wonder and an enigma to him; but on this day he seemed to grasp its meaning by a new light, as he watched Eve soften under its influence and felt himself drawn imperceptibly from the position of a speculative outsider to that of an intimate. It was a fresh side to the complex, fascinating life of which Fraide was the master spirit.

These reflections had grown agreeably familiar to his mind; the talk, momentarily diverted into social channels, was quietly drifting back to the inevitable question of the "situation" that in private moments was never far from their lips, when the event that was to mark and separate that day from those that had preceded it was unceremoniously thrust upon them.

Without announcement or apology, the door was suddenly flung open and Lakely entered the room.

His face was brimming with excitement, and his eyes flashed. In the first haste of the entry he failed to see that there were ladies in the room, and, crossing instantly to Fraide, laid an open telegram before him.

"This is official, sir," he said. Then at last he glanced round the table.

"Lady Sarah!" he exclaimed. "Can you forgive me? But I'd have given a hundred pounds to be the first with this!" He glanced back at Fraide.

Lady Sarah rose and stretched out her hand. "Mr. Lakely," she said, "I more than understand!" There was a thrill in her warm, cordial voice, and her eyes also turned towards her husband.

Of the whole party, Fraide alone was perfectly calm. He sat very still, his small, thin figure erect and dignified, as his eyes scanned the message that meant so much.

Eve, who had sprung from her seat and passed round the table at sound of Lakely's news, was leaning over his shoulder, reading the telegram with him. At the last word she lifted her head, her face flushed with excitement.

"How splendid it must be to be a man!" she exclaimed. And without premeditation her eyes and Loder's met.

In this manner came the news from Persia, and with it Loder's definite call. In the momentary stress of action it was impossible that any thought of Chilcote could obtrude itself. Events had followed each other too rapidly, decisive action had been too much thrust upon him, to allow of hesitation; and it was in this spirit, under this vigorous pressure, that he made his attack upon the government on the day that followed Fraide's luncheon party.

That indefinable attentiveness, that alert sensation of impending storm, that is so strong an index of the parliamentary atmosphere was very keen on that memorable first of April. It was obvious in the crowded benches on both sides of the House—in the oneness of purpose that insensibly made itself felt through the ranks of the Opposition, and found definite expression in Fraide's stiff figure and tightly shut lips—in the unmistakable uneasiness that lay upon the ministerial benches.

But notwithstanding these indications of battle, the early portion of the proceedings was unmarked by excitement, being tinged with the purposeless lack of vitality that had of late marked all affairs of the Sefborough Ministry; and it was not until the adjournment of the House for the Easter recess had at last been moved that the spirit of activity hovering in the air descended and galvanized the assembly into life. It was then, amid a stir of interest, that Loder slowly rose.

Many curious incidents have marked the speech-making annals of the House of Commons, but it is doubtful whether it has ever been the lot of a member to hear his own voice raised for the first time on a subject of vital interest to his party, having been denied all initial assistance of minor questions asked or unimportant amendments made. Of all those gathered together in the great building on that day, only one man appreciated the difficulty of Loder's position—and that man was Loder himself.

He rose slowly and stood silent for a couple of seconds, his body braced, his fingers touching the sheaf of notes that lay in front of him. To the waiting House the silence was effective. It might mean over-assurance, or it might mean a failure of nerve at a critical moment. Either possibility had a tinge of piquancy. Moved by the same impulse, fifty pairs of

eyes turned upon him with new interest; but up in the Ladies' Gallery Eve clasped her hands in sudden apprehension; and Fraide, sitting stiffly in his seat, turned and shot one swift glance at the man on whom, against prudence and precedent, he had pinned his faith. The glance was swift but very searching, and with a characteristic movement of his wiry shoulders he resumed his position and his usual grave, attentive attitude. At the same moment Loder lifted his head and began to speak.

Here at the outset his inexperience met him. His voice, pitched too low, only reached those directly near him. It was a moment of great strain. Eve, listening intently, drew a long breath of suspense and let her fingers drop apart; the sceptical, watchful eyes that faced him, line upon line, seemed to flash and brighten with critical interest; only Fraide made no change of expression. He sat placid, serious, attentive, with the shadow of a smile behind his eyes.

Again Loder paused, but this time the pause was shorter. The ordeal he had dreaded and waited for was passed and he saw his way clearly. With the old movement of the shoulders he straightened himself and once more began to speak. This time his voice rang quietly true and commanding across the floor of the House.

No first step can be really great; it must of necessity possess more of prophecy than of achievement; nevertheless it is by the first step that a man marks the value, not only of his cause, but of himself. Following broadly on the lines that tradition has laid down for the Conservative orator, Loder disguised rather than displayed the vein of strong, persuasive eloquence that was his natural gift. The occasion that might

possibly justify such a display of individuality might lie with the future, but it had no application to the present. For the moment his duty was to voice his party sentiments with as much lucidity, as much logic, and as much calm conviction as lay within his capacity.

Standing quietly in Chilcote's place, he was conscious with a deep sense of gravity of the peculiarity of his position; and perhaps it was this unconscious and unstudied seriousness that lent him the tone of weight and judgment so essential to the cause he had in hand. It has always been difficult to arouse the interest of the House on matters of British policy in Persia. Once aroused, it may, it is true, reach fever heat with remarkable rapidity, but the introductory stages offer that worst danger to the earnest speaker—the dread of an apathetic audience. But from this consideration Loder, by his sharp consciousness of personal difficulties, was given immunity.

Pitching his voice in that quietly masterful tone that beyond all others compels attention, he took up his subject and dealt with it with dispassionate force. With great skill he touched on the steady southward advance of Russia into Persian territory from the distant days when, by a curious irony of fate, Russian and British enterprise combined to make entry into the country under the sanction of the Grand-Duke of Moscovy, to the present hour, when this great power of Russia — long since alienated by interests and desires from her former co-operator—had taken a step which in the eyes of every thinking man must possess a deep significance. With quiet persistence he pointed out the peculiar position of Meshed in the distant province of Khorasan; its vast distance from the Persian Gulf,

round which British interests and influence centre, and the consequently alarming position of hundreds of traders who, in the security of British sovereignty, are fighting their way upward from India, from Afghanistan, even from England herself.

Following up his point, he dilated on these subjects of the British crown who, cut off from adequate assistance, can only turn in personal or commercial peril to the protective power of the nearest consulate. Then, quietly demanding the attention of his hearers, he marshalled fact after fact to demonstrate the isolation and inadequacy of a consulate so situated; the all but arbitrary power of Russia, who in her new occupation of Meshed had only two considerations to withhold her from open aggression—the knowledge of England as a very considerable but also a very distant power; the knowledge of Persia as an imminent but wholly impotent factor in the case.

Having stated his opinions, he reverted to the motive of his speech—his desire to put forward a strong protest against the adjournment of the House without an assurance from the government that immediate measures would be taken to safeguard British interests in Meshed and throughout the province of Khorasan.

The immediate outcome of Loder's speech was all that his party had desired. The effect on the House had been marked; and when, no satisfactory response coming to his demand, he had in still more resolute and insistent terms called for a division on the motion for adjournment, the result had been an appreciable fall in the government majority.

To Loder himself, the realization that he had at last vindicated and justified himself by individual action had a peculiar effect. His position had been altered in one remarkable particular. Before this day he alone had known himself to be strong; now the knowledge was shared by others and he was human enough to be susceptible to the change.

The first appreciation of it came immediately after the excitement of the division, when Fraide, singling him out, took his arm and pressed it affectionately.

"My dear Chilcote," he said, "we are all proud of you!" Then, looking up into his face, he added, in a graver tone, "But keep your mind upon the future; never be blinded by the present—however bright it seems."

At the touch of his hand, at the spontaneous approval of his first words, Loder's pride thrilled, and in a vehement rush of ambition his senses answered to the praise. Then, as Fraide in all unconsciousness added his second sentence, the hot glow of feeling suddenly chilled. In a sweep of intuitive reaction the meaning and the danger of his falsely real position extinguished his excitement and turned his triumph cold. With an involuntary gesture he withdrew his arm.

"You're very good, sir," he said. "And you're very right. We never should forget that there is—a future."

The old man glanced up, surprised by the tone.

"Quite so, Chilcote," he said, kindly. "But we only advise those in whom we believe to look towards it. Shall we find my wife? I know she will want to bear you home with us."

But Loder's joy in himself and his achievement had dropped from him. He shrank suddenly from Lady

Sarah's congratulations and Eve's warm, silent approbation.

"Thanks, sir," he said, "but I don't feel fit for society. A touch of my—nerves, I suppose." He laughed shortly. "But do you mind saying to Eve that I hope I have—satisfied her?" he added this as if in half-reluctant after-thought. Then, with a short pressure of Fraide's hand, he turned, evading the many groups that waited to claim him, and passed out of the House alone.

Hailing a cab, he drove to Grosvenor Square. All the exaltation of an hour ago had turned to ashes. His excitement had found its culmination in a sense of futility and premonition.

He met no one in the hall or on the stairs of Chilcote's house, and on entering the study he found that also deserted. Greening had been among the most absorbed of those who had listened to his speech. Passing at once into the room, he crossed as if by instinct to the desk, and there halted. On the top of some unopened letters lay the significant yellow envelope of a telegram—the telegram that in an unformed, subconscious way had sprung to his expectation on the moment of Fraide's congratulation.

Very quietly he picked it up, opened and read it, and, with the automatic caution that had become habitual, carried it across the room and dropped it in the fire. This done, he returned to the desk, read the letters that awaited Chilcote, and, scribbling the necessary notes upon the margins, left them in readiness for Greening. Then, moving with the same quiet suppression, he passed from the room, down the stairs, and out into the street by the way he had come.

XX

ON the fifth day after the momentous 1st of April on which he had recalled Loder and resumed his own life Chilcote left his house and walked towards Bond Street. Though the morning was clear and the air almost warm for the time of year, he was buttoned into a long overcoat and was wearing a muffler and a pair of doeskin gloves. As he passed along the street he kept close to the house fronts to avoid the sun that was everywhere stirring the winter-bound town, like a suffusion of young blood through old veins. He avoided the warmth because in this instance warmth meant light, but as he moved he shivered slightly from time to time with the haunting, permeating cold that of late had become his persistent shadow.

He was ill at ease as he hurried forward. With each succeeding day of the old life the new annoyances, the new obligations became more hampering. Before his compact with Loder this old life had been a net about his feet; now the meshes seemed to have narrowed, the net itself to have spread till it smothered his whole being. His own household—his own rooms, even—offered no sanctuary. The presence of another personality tinged the atmosphere. It was preposterous, but it was undeniable. The lay figure that he had set in his place had proved to be flesh and blood—had