

XXIII

AND Loder dined with Lillian Astrupp. We live in an age when society expects, even exacts, much. He dined, not through bravado and not through cowardice, but because it seemed the obvious, the only thing to do. To him a scene of any description was distasteful; to Lillian it was unknown. In her world people loved or hated, were spiteful or foolish, were even quixotic or dishonorable, but they seldom made scenes. Loder tacitly saw and tacitly accepted this.

Possibly they ate extremely little during the course of the dinner, and talked extraordinarily much on subjects that interested neither; but the main point at least was gained. They dined. The conventionalities were appeased; the silent, watchful servants who waited on them were given no food for comment. The fact that Loder left immediately after dinner, the fact that he paused on the door-step after the hall door had closed behind him, and drew a long, deep breath of relief, held only an individual significance and therefore did not count.

On reaching Chilcote's house he passed at once to the study and dismissed Greening for the night. But scarcely had he taken advantage of his solitude by settling into an arm-chair and lighting a cigar, than Renwick, displaying an unusual amount of haste and importance, entered the room carrying a letter.

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Seeing Loder, he came forward at once. "Mr. Fraide's man brought this, sir," he explained. "He was most particular to give it into my hands—making sure 'twould reach you. He's waiting for an answer, sir."

Loder rose and took the letter, a quick thrill of speculation and interest springing across his mind. During his time of banishment he had followed the political situation with feverish attention, insupportably chafed by the desire to share in it, apprehensively chilled at the thought of Chilcote's possible behavior. He knew that in the comparatively short interval since Parliament had risen no act of aggression had marked the Russian occupation of Meshed, but he also knew that Fraide and his followers looked askance at that great power's amiable attitude, and at sight of his leader's message his intuition stirred.

Turning to the nearest lamp, he tore the envelope open and scanned the letter anxiously. It was written in Fraide's own clear, somewhat old-fashioned writing, and opened with a kindly rebuke for his desertion of him since the day of his speech; then immediately, and with characteristic clearness, it opened up the subject nearest the writer's mind.

Very slowly and attentively Loder read the letter; and with the extreme quiet that with him invariably covered emotion, he moved to the desk, wrote a note, and handed it to the waiting servant. As the man turned towards the door he called him.

"Renwick!" he said, sharply, "when you've given that letter to Mr. Fraide's servant, ask Mrs. Chilcote if she can spare me five minutes."

When Renwick had gone and closed the door behind

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him, Loder paced the room with feverish activity. In one moment the aspect of life had been changed. Five minutes since he had been glorying in the risk of a barely saved situation; now that situation with its merely social complications had become a matter of small importance.

His long, striding steps had carried him to the fireplace, and his back was towards the door when at last the handle turned. He wheeled round to receive Eve's message; then a look of pleased surprise crossed his face. It was Eve herself who stood in the doorway.

Without hesitation his lips parted. "Eve," he said, abruptly, "I have had great news! Russia has shown her teeth at last. Two caravans belonging to a British trader were yesterday interfered with by a band of Cossacks. The affair occurred a couple of miles outside Meshed; the traders remonstrated, but the Russians made summary use of their advantage. Two Englishmen were wounded and one of them has since died. Fraide has only now received the news—which cannot be overrated. It gives the precise lever necessary for the big move at the reassembling." He spoke with great earnestness and unusual haste. As he finished he took a step forward. "But that's not all!" he added. "Fraide wants the great move set in motion by a great speech—and he has asked me to make it."

For a moment Eve waited. She looked at him in silence; and in that silence he read in her eyes the reflection of his own expression.

"And you?" she asked, in a suppressed voice. "What answer did you give?"

He watched her for an instant, taking a strange

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pleasure in her flushed face and brilliantly eager eyes; then the joy of conscious strength, the sense of opportunity regained, swept all other considerations out of sight.

"I accepted," he said, quickly. "Could any man who was merely human have done otherwise?"

That was Loder's attitude and action on the night of his jeopardy and his success, and the following day found his mood unchanged. He was one of those rare individuals who never give a promise overnight and regret it in the morning. He was slow to move, but when he did the movement brushed all obstacles aside. In the first days of his usurpation he had gone cautiously, half fascinated, half distrustful; then the reality, the extraordinary tangibility of the position had gripped him when, matching himself for the first time with men of his own caliber, he had learned his real weight on the day of his protest against the Easter adjournment. With that knowledge had been born the dominant factor in his whole scheme—the overwhelming, insistent desire to manifest his power. That desire that is the salvation or the ruin of every strong man who has once realized his strength. Supremacy was the note to which his ambition reached. To trample out Chilcote's footmarks with his own had been his tacit instinct from the first; now it rose paramount. It was the whole theory of creation—the survival of the fittest—the deep, egotistical certainty that he was the better man.

And it was with this conviction that he entered on the vital period of his dual career. The imminent crisis, and his own share in it, absorbed him absolutely.

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In the weeks that followed his answer to Fraide's proposal he gave himself ungrudgingly to his work. He wrote, read, and planned with tireless energy; he frequently forgot to eat, and slept only through sheer exhaustion; in the fullest sense of the word he lived for the culminating hour that was to bring him failure or success.

He seldom left Grosvenor Square in the days that followed, except to confer with his party. All his interest, all his relaxation even, lay in his work and what pertained to it. His strength was like a solid wall, his intelligence was sharp and keen as steel. The moment was his; and by sheer mastery of will he put other considerations out of sight. He forgot Chilcote and forgot Lillian—not because they escaped his memory, but because he chose to shut them from it.

Of Eve he saw but little in this time of high pressure. When a man touches the core of his capacities, puts his best into the work that in his eyes stands paramount, there is little place for, and no need of, woman. She comes before—and after. She inspires, compensates, or completes; but the achievement, the creation, is man's alone. And all true women understand and yield to this unspoken precept.

Eve watched the progress of his labor, and in the depth of her own heart the watching came nearer to actual living than any activity she had known. She was an on-looker—but an on-looker who stood, as it were, on the steps of the arena, who, by a single forward movement, could feel the sand under her feet, the breath of the battle on her face; and in this knowledge she rested satisfied.

There were hours when Loder seemed scarcely

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conscious of her existence; but on those occasions she smiled in her serene way—and went on waiting. She knew that each day, before the afternoon had passed, he would come into her sitting-room, his face thoughtful, his hands full of books or papers, and, dropping into one of the comfortable, studious chairs, would ask laconically for tea. This was her moment of triumph and recompense—for the very unconsciousness of his coming doubled its value. He would sit for half an hour with a preoccupied glance, or with keen, alert eyes fixed on the fire, while his ideas sorted themselves and fell into line. Sometimes he was silent for the whole half-hour, sometimes he commented to himself as he scanned his notes; but on other and rarer occasions he talked, speaking his thoughts and his theories aloud, with the enjoyment of a man who knows himself fully in his depth, while Eve sipped her tea or stitched peacefully at a strip of embroidery.

On these occasions she made a perfect listener. Here and there she encouraged him with an intelligent remark, but she never interrupted. She knew when to be silent and when to speak; when to merge her own individuality and when to make it felt. In these days of stress and preparation he came to her unconsciously for rest; he treated her as he might have treated a younger brother—relying on her discretion, turning to her as by right for sympathy, comprehension, and friendship. Sometimes, as they sat silent in the richly colored, homelike room, Eve would pause over her embroidery and let her thoughts spin momentarily forward—spin towards the point where, the brunt of his ordeal passed, he must of necessity seek something beyond mere rest. But there her thoughts

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would inevitably break off and the blood flame quickly into her cheek.

Meanwhile Loder worked persistently. With each day that brought the crisis of Fraide's scheme nearer, his activity increased—and with it an intensifying of the nervous strain. For if he had his hours of exaltation, he also had his hours of black apprehension. It is all very well to exorcise a ghost by sheer strength of will, but one has also to eliminate the idea that gave it existence. Lillian Astrupp, with her unattested evidence and her ephemeral interest, gave him no real uneasiness; but Chilcote and Chilcote's possible summons were matters of graver consideration; and there were times when they loomed very dark and sinister. What if at the very moment of fulfilment—? But invariably he snapped the thread of the supposition and turned with fiercer ardor to his work of preparation.

And so the last morning of his probation dawned, and for the first time he breathed freely.

He rose early on the day that was to witness his great effort and dressed slowly. It was a splendid morning; the spirit of the spring seemed embodied in the air, in the pale-blue sky, in the shafts of cool sunshine that danced from the mirror to the dressing-table, from the dressing-table to the pictures on the walls of Chilcote's vast room. Inconsequently with its dancing rose a memory of the distant past—a memory of long-forgotten days when, as a child, he had been bidden to watch the same sun perform the same fantastic evolutions. The sight and the thought stirred him curiously with an unlooked-for sense of youth. He drew himself together with an added touch of decision as he passed out into the corridor; and as he walked

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down-stairs he whistled a bar or two of an inspiring tune.

In the morning-room Eve was already waiting. She looked up, colored, and smiled as he entered. Her face looked very fresh and young and she wore a gown of the same pale blue that she had worn on his first coming.

She looked up from an open letter as he came into the room, and the sun that fell through the window caught her in a shaft of light, intensifying her blue eyes, her blue gown, and the bunch of violets fastened in her belt. To Loder, still under the influence of early memories, she seemed the embodiment of some youthful ideal—something lost, sought for, and found again. Realization of his feeling for her almost came to him as he stood there looking at her. It hovered about him; it tipped him, as it were, with its wings; then it rose again and soared away. Men like him—men keen to grasp an opening where their careers are concerned, and tenacious to hold it when once grasped—are frequently the last to look into their own hearts. He glanced at Eve, he acknowledged the stir of his feeling, but he made no attempt to define its cause. He could no more have given reason for his sensations than he could have told the precise date upon which, coming down-stairs at eight o'clock, he had first found her waiting breakfast for him. The time when all such incidents were to stand out, each to a nicety in its appointed place, had not yet arrived. For the moment his youth had returned to him; he possessed the knowledge of work done, the sense of present companionship in a world of agreeable things; above all, the steady, quiet conviction of his own capacity. All these

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things came to him in the moment of his entering the room, greeting Eve, and passing to the breakfast-table; then, while his eyes still rested contentedly on the pleasant array of china and silver, while his senses were still alive to the fresh, earthly scent of Eve's violets, the blow so long dreaded—so slow in coming—fell with accumulated force.

XXIV

THE letter through which the blow fell was not voluminous. It was written on cheap paper in a disguised hand, and the contents covered only half a page. Loder read it slowly, mentally articulating every word; then he laid it down, and as he did so he caught Eve's eyes raised in concern. Again he saw something of his own feelings reflected in her face, and the shock braced him; he picked up the letter, tearing it into strips.

"I must go out," he said, slowly. "I must go now—at once." His voice was hard.

Eve's surprised, concerned eyes still searched his. "Now—at once?" she repeated. "Now—without breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry." He rose from his seat, and, carrying the slips of paper across the room, dropped them into the fire. He did it, not so much from caution, as from an imperative wish to do something, to move, if only across the room.

Eve's glance followed him. "Is it bad news?" she asked, anxiously. It was unlike her to be insistent, but she was moved to the impulse by the peculiarity of the moment.

"No," he said shortly. "It's—business. This was written yesterday; I should have got it last night."

Her eyes widened. "But nobody does business at