CHAPTER XV

THE RISE OF THE BOLSHEVIKI

From July on, Kerensky seemed to lose his grip on things somehow, and to change both his personality and his policy. Whether this came from ill-health, and his breaking down under the strain of his varied occupations and responsibilities; or whether he realized some of the dramatic failures of the revolution, and this affected his capacity, or whether it was simply that he was not the type of man to stand his personal success, it is difficult to say. In the early days he had been of the people and disdained luxury. Now he moved to the Winter Palace, occupied the Emperor’s suite there, sleeping in the Emperor’s bed, using his desk and his motors, giving audience with much form and ceremony, and surrounding himself with luxury and sentinels.

The capital gossiped much. The conservative group, who until now had been full of admiration for Kerensky’s honesty and patriotism and had trusted him, became disillusioned. The Socialists felt their golden statue was uncovering feet of clay, and his own cabinet was helpless. One of the ministers said that he had frankly told Kerensky his present attitude was that of a small man, and would greatly diminish his prestige with all classes. But protests seemed to have as little effect now as they had had under the old régime. Kerensky considered himself the idol of the soldiers, peasants, and rough street groups. As the weeks passed, there were murmurs against him, only vague at first; but his policy was to keep his personal popularity at any cost; and the price of it, became a constant flow of concessions to the nation’s baser instincts. This lasted through July and August.

My trip back to Kief was without adventure. The quiet hours in the train came as a welcome rest, after the exciting experiences of my stay in the capital. I had time to digest all the impressions of the two weeks just passed. It seemed to me more than ever certain we were in desperate straits, and that the well-to-do population would be called upon to pay the price of government mistakes in the past, and also that for possible future progress. I saw no help for us as a group, nor for the country, unless through a miracle of the eleventh hour; and from where should this miracle now come?

I lay awake reading and thinking until late into the night, as the train moved southward. In the corridor of the car a dozen or more soldiers were sleeping heavily. I heard them breathe and turn. One was half sitting, half leaning against my door, which occasionally creaked behind his weight. During the afternoon they had been talking politics loudly; and such nonsense as to what the revolution would do had been passed round that I grew desperate in the thought of their lack of understanding. One old fellow sat silent during all these discussions, and while our berths were being prepared for the night, these rough men made me standing room among them, and I found myself next the quiet fellow. I was chilled and
commander of the Petrograd garrison, and now commander-in-chief of the army, was given a tremendous ovation by the public, when he spoke detailing all the miserable facts connected with our situation. He implored the government to act, and with a firm hand to uphold the ideals which had been in everyone's mind at the beginning of the revolution. Especially he begged laws might be enacted to suppress lack of discipline in the army, and to abolish the ridiculous measures, which had made our magnificent fighting machine the tragic farce it had become.

Korniloff spoke splendidly, and commanded admiration not only from all his hearers, but also from the various press organs, which all over Russia printed his speech next day. He offered to risk acting himself in the matter of the army, begging only that the administration uphold him by its authoritative consent, and saying that he would take and face the responsibility and unpopularity, any repressive measures would cause to their inaugurator.

Kerensky's appearance at the conference had created comment against him, as he had quite evidently lost much of his prestige. He was trying to regain it, by expressing a desire for concessions to the very lowest elements. He seemed artificial, and had lost his fire; his catchwords, grown old, seemed meaningless, and were without effect. Essaying explanations of the dramatic mistakes of the past months, he was unconvincing; while the other ministers of his cabinet who tried to speak received no encouragement whatever. They offered the long-suffering public merely accounts of the general failure of their efforts, as they told of the congested railroads, insufficient funds and harvest, and of the factories closed, and the population victimized by six months' disorders.

This Moscow conference, from which much had been hoped, broke up without coming to any conclusions; and its results were only to confirm the general sense of danger, and of restless anxiety; and to show up the hopelessness of our country's situation. At its end, there was a Bolshevik demonstration in Moscow, with shouted accusations that the government had invited only "conservatives and counter-revolutionists" to take part. As usual, there was no armed force to protect the cabinet or conservatives, so the conference broke up, and the ministers left Moscow as rapidly as possible. Then the rabble quieted. Korniloff returned to staff headquarters at Moghileff, and the government to Petrograd, while Rodzanko, General Brusiloff, and all others who were long since revolutionists, but now were called counter-revolutionists and were forced quite out of public life, disappeared from view permanently.