

THE Masquerader

By KATHERINE CECIL THURSTON,
Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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Loder turned. "Why, in the devil's name"—he began; then again he halted. Something in Chilcote's drawn, excited face checked him. The strange sense of predestination that we sometimes see in the eyes of another struck cold upon him, chilling his last attempt at remonstrance. "What do you want me to do?" he substituted in an ordinary voice.

The words steadied Chilcote. He laughed a little. The laugh was still shaky, but it was pitched in a lower key.

"You—you're quite right to pull me up. We have no time to waste. It must be 1 o'clock." He pulled out his watch, then walked to the window and stood looking down into the shadowy court. "How quiet you are here!" he said. Then abruptly a new thought struck him, and he wheeled back into the room. "Loder," he said quickly—"Loder, I have an idea! While you are me, why shouldn't I be you? Why shouldn't I be John Loder instead of the vagrant we contemplated? It covers everything; it explains everything. It's magnificent! I'm amazed we never thought of it before."

Loder was still beside the desk. "I thought of it," he said without looking back.

"And didn't suggest it?"

"No."

"Why?"

Loder said nothing, and the other colored.

"Jealous of your reputation?" he said satirically.

"I have none to be jealous of."

Chilcote laughed disagreeably. "Then you aren't so far gone in philosophy as I thought. You have a niche in your own good opinion."

Again Loder was silent; then he smiled. "You have an oddly correct perception at times," he said. "I suppose I have had a lame sort of pride in keeping my name clean, but pride like that is out of fashion, and I've got to float with the tide." He laughed a short laugh that Chilcote had heard once or twice before, and, crossing the room, he stood beside his visitor. "After all," he said, "what business have I with pride, straight or lame? Have my identity, if you want it. When all defenses have been broken down one barrier won't save the town." Laughing again, he laid his hand on the other's arm. "Come," he said, "give your orders. I capitulate."

An hour later the two men passed from Loder's bedroom, where the final arrangements had been completed, back into the sitting room. Loder came first in faultless evening dress. His hair was carefully brushed, the clothes he wore fitted him perfectly. To any glance, critical or casual, he was the man who had mounted the stairs and entered the rooms earlier in the evening. Chilcote's manner of walking and pose of the head seemed to have descended upon him with Chilcote's clothes. He came into the room hastily and passed to the desk.

"I have no private papers," he said, "so I have nothing to lock up. Everything can stand as it is. A woman named Robins comes in the mornings to clean up and light the fire; otherwise you must shift for yourself. Nobody will disturb you. Quiet, dead quiet, is about the one thing you can count on."

Chilcote, half halting in the doorway, made an attempt to laugh. Of the two he was noticeably the more embarrassed. In Loder's well worn, well brushed tweed suit he felt stranded on his own personality, bereft for the moment of the familiar accessories that helped to cloak deficiencies and keep the wheel of conventionality comfortably rolling. He stood unpleasantly conscious of himself, unable to shape his sensations even in thought. He glanced at the fire, at the table, finally at the chair on which he had thrown his overcoat before entering the bedroom. At the sight of the coat his gaze brightened, the aimlessness forsook him, and he gave an exclamation of relief.

"By Jove!" he said. "I clean forgot."

"What?" Loder looked round.

"The rings." He crossed to the coat and thrust his hand into the pocket. "The duplicates arrived only this afternoon—the nick of time, eh?" He spoke fast, his fingers searching busily. Occupation of any kind came as a boon.

Loder slowly followed him, and as the box was brought to light he leaned forward intently.

"As I told you, one is the copy of an old signet ring, the other a plain band—a plain gold band like a wedding ring." Chilcote laughed as he placed

the four rings side by side on his palm. "I could think of nothing else that would be wide and not ostentatious. You know how I detest display."

Loder touched the rings. "You have good taste," he said. "Let's see if they serve their purpose." He picked them up and carried them to the lamp.

Chilcote followed him. "That was an ugly wound," he said, his curiosity reawakening as Loder extended his finger. "How did you come by it?"

The other smiled. "It's a memento," he said.

"Of bravery?"

"No; quite the reverse." He looked again at his hand, then glanced back at Chilcote. "No," he repeated, with an unusual impulse of confidence. "It serves to remind me that I am not exempt—that I have been fooled like other men."

"That implies a woman?"

"Yes." Again Loder looked at the scar on his finger. "I seldom recall the thing, it's so absolutely past. But I rather like to remember it tonight. I rather want you to know that I've been through the fire. It's a sort of guarantee."

Chilcote made a hasty gesture, but the other interrupted it.

"Oh, I know you trust me. But you're giving me a risky post. I want you to see that women are out of my line—quite out of it."

"But, my dear chap—"

Loder went on without heeding.

"This thing happened eight years ago at Santasalaro," he said, "a little place between Luna and Pistoria—a mere handful of houses wedged between two hills; a regular relic of old Italy crumbling away under flowers and sunshine, with nothing to suggest the present century except the occasional passing of a train round the base of one of the hills. I had literally stumbled upon the place on a long tramp south from Switzerland and had been tempted into a stay at the little inn. The night after my arrival something unusual occurred. There was an accident to the train at the point where it skirted the village."

"There was a small excitement. All the inhabitants were anxious to help, and I took my share. As a matter of fact, the smash was not disastrous; the passengers were hurt and frightened, but nobody was killed."

He paused and looked at his companion; but, seeing him interested, went on.

"Among these passengers was an English lady. Of all concerned in the business, she was the least upset. When I came upon her she was sitting on the shattered door of one of the carriages calmly arranging her hat. On seeing me she looked up with the most charming smile imaginable.

"I have just been waiting for somebody like you," she said. "My stupid maid has got herself smashed up somewhere in the second class carriage, and I have nobody to help me find my dog."

"Of course, that first speech ought to have enlightened me, but it didn't. I only saw the smile and heard the voice. I knew nothing of whether they were deep or shallow. So I found the maid and found the dog. The first expressed gratitude, the other didn't. I extricated him with enormous difficulty from the wreck of the luggage van, and this was how he marked his appreciation." He held out his hand and nodded toward the seat.

Chilcote glanced up. "So that's the explanation?"

"Yes. I tried to conceal the thing when I restored the dog, but I was bleeding abominably and I failed. Then the whole business was changed. It was I who needed seeing to, my new friend insisted; I who should be looked after and not she. She forgot the dog in the newer interest of my wounded finger. The maid, who was practically unhurt, was sent on to engage rooms at the little inn, and she and I followed slowly."

"That walk impressed me. There was an attractive mistiness of atmosphere in the warm night, a sensation more than attractive in being made much of by a woman of one's own class and country after five years' wandering."

He laughed with a touch of irony.

"But I won't take up your time with details. You know the progress of an ordinary love affair. Throw in a few more flowers and a little more sunshine than is usual, a man who is practically a hermit and a woman who knows the world by heart and you have the whole thing."

"She insisted on staying in Santasalaro for three days in order to keep my finger band safe. She ended by staying

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three weeks in the hope of smashing up my life.

"On coming to the hotel she had given no name, and in our first explanations to each other she led me to conclude her an unmarried girl. It was at the end of the three weeks that I learned that she was not a free agent, as I had innocently imagined, but possessed a husband whom she had left ill with malaria at Florence or Rome.

"The news disconcerted me, and I took no pains to hide it. After that the end came abruptly. In her eyes I had become a fool with middle class principles; in my eyes—But there is no need for that. She left Santasalaro the same night in a great confusion of trunks and hatboxes, and next morning I strapped on my knapsack and turned my face to the south."

"And women don't count ever after?" Chilcote smiled, beguiled out of himself.

Loder laughed. "That's what I've been trying to convey. Once bitten, twice shy!" He laughed again and slipped the two rings over his finger with an air of finality.

"Now, shall I start? This is the latchkey?" He drew a key from the pocket of Chilcote's evening clothes. "When I get to Grosvenor square I am to find your house, go straight in, mount the stairs and there on my right hand will be the door of your—I mean my own—private rooms. I think I've got it by heart. I feel inspired. I feel that I can't go wrong." He handed the two remaining rings to Chilcote and picked up the overcoat.

"I'll stick on till I get a wire," he said. "Then I'll come back and we'll reverse again." He slipped on the coat and moved back toward the table. Now that the decisive moment had come it embarrassed him. Scarcely knowing how to bring it to an end, he held out his hand.

Chilcote took it, pulling a little. "I'll be all right!" he said, with a sudden return of nervousness. "I'll be all right! And I've made it plain about—the remuneration? A hundred a week, besides all expenses."

Loder smiled again. "My pay? Oh, yes, you've made it clear as day. Shall we say good night now?"

"Yes. Good night." There was a strange, distant note in Chilcote's voice, but the other did not

pretend to hear it. He pressed the hand he was holding, though the cold dampness of it repelled him.

"Good night," he said again.

"Good night."

They stood for a moment awkwardly looking at each other, then Loder quietly disengaged his hand, crossed the room and passed through the door.

Chilcote, left standing alone in the middle of the room, listened while the last sound of the other's footsteps was audible on the uncarpeted stairs. Then, with a furtive, hurried gesture, he caught up the green shaded lamp and passed into Loder's bedroom.

CHAPTER VIII.

TO all men come portentous moments, difficult moments, triumphant moments. Loder had had his examples of all three, but no moment in his career ever equaled in strangeness of sensation that in which, dressed in another man's clothes, he fitted the latchkey for the first time into the door of the other man's house.

The act was quietly done. The key fitted the lock smoothly, and his fingers turned it without hesitation, though his heart, usually extremely steady, beat sharply for a second. The hall loomed massive and somber, despite the modernity of electric lights. It was darkly and expensively decorated in black and brown; a frieze of wrought bronze, representing peacocks with outspread tails, ornamented the walls; the banisters were of heavy ironwork, and the somewhat formidable fireplace was of the same dark metal.

Loder looked about him, then advanced, his heart again beating quickly as his hand touched the cold banister and he began his ascent of the stairs. But at each step his confidence strengthened, his feet became more firm until, at the head of the stairs, as if to disprove his assurance, his pulses played him false once more, this time to a more serious tune. From the farther end of a well lighted corridor a maid was coming straight in his direction.

For one short second all things seemed to whiz about him; the certainty of detection overpowered his mind. The indisputable knowledge

that he was John Loder and no other, despite all armor of effrontery and dress, so dominated him that all other considerations shrunk before it. It wanted but one word, one simple word of denunciation, and the whole scheme was shattered. In the dismay of the moment he almost wished that the word might be spoken and the suspense ended.

But the maid came on in silence, and so incredible was the silence that Loder moved onward too. He came within a yard of her, and still she did not speak. Then, as he passed her, she drew back respectfully against the wall.

The strain, so astonishingly short, had been immense, but with its slackening came a strong reaction. The expected humiliation seethed suddenly to a desire to dare fate. Pausing quickly, he turned and called the woman back.

The spot where he had halted was vividly bright, the ceiling light being



Loder bore his scrutiny without flinching.

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