

THE Masquerader

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Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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[CONTINUED.]

Loder looked down at him. "No," he said decisively. "It's your turn now. It's you who've got to do something."

Chilcote's face turned a shade grayer. "I can't," he said below his breath.

"Can't? Oh, yes, you can. We can all do anything. It's not too late; there's just sufficient time." Chilcote, he added suddenly, "don't you see that the thing has been madness all along—has been like playing with the most infernal explosives? You may thank whatever you have faith in that nobody has been smashed up! You are going back. Do you understand me? You are going back—now, today, before it's too late." There was a great change in Loder; his strong, imperturbable face was stirred; he was moved in both voice and manner. Time after time he repeated his injunction, reasoning, expostulating, insisting. It almost seemed that he fought some strenuous invisible force rather than the shattered man before him.

Chilcote moved nervously in his seat. It was the first real clash of personalities. He felt it—recognized it by instinct. The sense of domination had fallen on him; he knew himself impotent in the other's hands. Whatever he might attempt in moments of solitude he possessed no voice in presence of this invincible second self. For awhile he struggled—he did not fight, he struggled to resist—then, lifting his eyes, he met Loder's. "And what will you do?" he said weakly.

Loder returned his questioning gaze, but almost immediately he turned aside. "I?" he said. "Oh, I shall leave London."

CHAPTER XXVII.

BUT Loder did not leave London, and the hour of 2 on the day following his dismissal of Chilcote found him again in his sitting room.

He sat at the center table surrounded by a cloud of smoke; a pipe was between his lips and the morning's newspapers lay in a heap beside his elbow. To the student of humanity his attitude was intensely interesting. It was the attitude of a man trampled by the knowledge of his strength. Before him as he sat smoking stretched a future of absolute nothingness, and toward this blank future one portion of his consciousness—a struggling and as yet scarcely sentient portion—pushed him inevitably; while another—a vigorous, persistent, human portion—cried to him to pause. So actual, so clamorous, was this silent mental combat that had raged unceasingly since the moment of his renunciation that at last in physical response to it he pushed back his chair.

"It's too late," he said aloud. "I'm a fool. It's too late."

Then abruptly, astonishingly, as though in direct response to his spoken thought, the door opened and Chilcote walked into the room.

Slowly Loder rose and stared at him. The feeling he acknowledged to himself was anger, but below the anger a very different sensation ran riotously strong. And it was in time to this second feeling, this sudden, lawless joy, that his pulses beat as he turned a cold face on the intruder.

"Well?" he said sternly.

But Chilcote was impervious to sternness. He was mentally shaken and distressed, though outwardly irreproachable, even to the violets in the lapel of his coat—the violets that for a week past had been brought each morning to the door of Loder's rooms by Eve's maid. For one second, as Loder's eyes rested on the flowers, a sting of ungovernable jealousy shot through him; then as suddenly it died away, superseded by another feeling—a feeling of new, spontaneous joy. Worn by Chilcote or by himself, the flowers were a symbol!

"Well?" he said again in a gentler voice.

Chilcote had walked to the table and laid down his hat. His face was white and the muscles of his lips twitched nervously as he drew off his gloves.

"Thank heaven, you're here!" he said shortly. "Give me something to drink."

In silence Loder brought out the whisky and set it on the table; then instinctively he turned aside. As plainly as though he saw the action he mentally figured Chilcote's furtive glance, the furtive movement of his fingers to his waistcoat pocket, the hasty dropping of the tabloids into the glass. For an instant the sense of his tacit connivance came to him sharply; the next, he flung it from him. The human, inner voice was whispering its old watchword. The strong man has no time to waste over his weaker

brother!

When he heard Chilcote lay down his tumbler he looked back again. "Well, what is it?" he said. "What have you come for?" He strove resolutely to keep his voice severe but, try as he might, he could not quite subdue the eager force that lay behind his words. Once again, as on the night of their second interchange, life had become a phoenix, rising to fresh existence even while he sifted its ashes. "Well?" he said once again.

Chilcote had set down his glass. He was nervously passing his handkerchief across his lips. There was something in the gesture that attracted Loder. Looking at him more attentively, he saw what his own feelings and the other's conventional dress had blinded him to—the almost pitious panic and excitement in his visitor's eyes.

"Something's gone wrong!" he said, with abrupt intuition.

Chilcote started. "Yes—no—that is, yes," he stammered.

Loder moved around the table. "Something's gone wrong," he repeated, "and you've come to tell me."

The tone unnerved Chilcote. He suddenly dropped into a chair. "It—it wasn't my fault!" he began. "I—I have had a horrible time!"

Loder's lips tightened. "Yes," he said, "yes, I understand."

The other glanced up with a gleam of his old suspicion. "'Twas all my nerves, Loder!"

"Of course. Yes, of course," Loder's interruption was curt.

Chilcote eyed him doubtfully. Then recollection took the place of doubt, and a change passed over his expression. "It wasn't my fault," he began hastily. "On my soul, it wasn't! It was Crapham's beastly fault for showing her into the morning room!"

Loder kept silent. His curiosity had been aroused by the other's admission that he feared to break the shattered train of thought even by a word.

In the silence Chilcote moved uneasily. "You see," he went on at last, "when I was here with you I—I felt strong—I—I— He stopped.

"Yes, yes. When you were here with me you felt strong."

"Yes, that's it. While I was here I felt I could do the thing. But when I went home—when I went up to my rooms"— Again he paused, passing his handkerchief across his forehead.

"When you went up to your rooms?" Loder strove hard to keep his control.

"To my room?— Oh, I—I forgot about that. I forgot about the night!"— He hesitated confusedly. "All I remember is the coming down to breakfast next morning—this morning—at 12 o'clock!"

Loder turned to the table and poured himself out some whisky. "Yes," he acquiesced in a very quiet voice.

At the word Chilcote rose from his seat. His disquietude was very evident. "Oh, there was breakfast on the table when I came downstairs—breakfast, with flowers and a horrible, dazzling glare of sun. It was then, Loder, as I stood and looked into the room, that the impossibility of it all came to me—that I knew I couldn't stand it—couldn't go on."

Loder swallowed his whisky slowly. His sense of overpowering curiosity held him very still, but he made no effort to prompt his companion.

Again Chilcote shifted his position agitatedly. "It had to be done," he said disjointedly. "I had to do it—then and there. The things were on the bureau—the pens and ink and telegraph forms. They tempted me."

Loder laid down his glass suddenly. An exclamation rose to his lips, but he checked it.

At the slight sound of the tumbler touching the table Chilcote turned, but there was no expression on the other's face to affront him.

"They tempted me," he repeated hastily. "They seemed like magnets; they seemed to draw me toward them. I sat at the bureau staring at them for a long time. Then a terrible compulsion seized me—something you could never understand—and I caught up the nearest pen and wrote just what was in my mind. It wasn't a telegram, properly speaking. It was more a letter. I wanted you back, and I had to make myself plain. The writing of the message seemed to steady me; the mere forming of the words quieted my mind. I was almost cool when I got up from the bureau and pressed the bell!"

"The bell?"

"Yes. I rang for a servant. I had to send the wire myself, so I had to get a cab." His voice rose to irritability. "I pressed the bell several times, but the thing had gone wrong; 'twouldn't work. At last I gave it up and went into the corridor to call some one."

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"Well?" In the intense suspense of the moment the word escaped Loder.

"Oh, I went out of the room, but there at the door, before I could call anybody, I knocked up against that idiot Greening. He was looking for me—for you, rather—about some beastly Wark affair. I tried to explain that I wasn't in a state for business. I tried to shake him off, but he was worse than Blessington! At last, to be rid of the fellow, I went with him to the study!"

"But the telegram?" Loder began. Then again he checked himself. "Yes—yes—I understand," he added quietly.

"I'm getting to the telegram! I wish you wouldn't jar me with sudden questions. I wasn't in the study more than a minute more than five or six minutes"— His voice became confused, the strain of the connected recital was telling upon him. With nervous haste he made a rush for the end of his story. "I wasn't more than seven or eight



"Loder, what are you going to do?" minutes in the study; then, as I came downstairs Crapham met me in the hall. He told me that Lillian Astrupp

had called and wished to see me and that he had shown her into the morning room!"

"The morning room?" Loder suddenly stepped back from the table. "The morning room? With your telegram lying on the bureau?"

His sudden speech and movement startled Chilcote. The blood rushed to his face, then died out, leaving it ashen. "Don't do that, Loder!" he cried. "I—I can't bear it!"

With an immense effort Loder controlled himself. "Sorry," he said. "Go on!"

"I'm going on. I tell you I'm going on! I got a horrid shock when Crapham told me. Your story came clattering through my mind. I knew Lillian had come to see you. I knew there was going to be a scene!"

"But the telegram! The telegram!"

Chilcote paid no heed to the interruption. He was following his own train of ideas. "I knew she had come to see you. I knew there was going to be a scene. When I got to the morning room my hand was shaking so that I could scarcely turn the handle; then, as the door opened, I could have cried out with relief. Eve was there as well!"

"Eve?"

"Yes. I don't think I was ever so glad to see her in my life." He laughed almost hysterically. "I was quite civil to her, and she was—quite sweet to me"— Again he laughed.

Loder's lips tightened.

"You see, it saved the situation. Even if Lillian wanted to be nasty, she couldn't while Eve was there. We talked for about ten minutes. We were quite an amiable trio. Then Lillian told me why she'd called. She wanted me to make a fourth in a theater party at the Arcadian tonight, and I—I was so pleased and so relieved that I said yes!" He paused and laughed again unsteadily.

In his tense anxiety Loder ground his heel into the floor. "Go on!" he said fiercely. "Go on!"

"Don't!" Chilcote exclaimed. "I'm going on—I'm going on." He passed his handkerchief across his lips. "We talked for ten minutes or so, and then Lillian left. I went with her to the hall door, but Crapham was there too—so I was still safe. She laughed and chatted and seemed in high spirits as we crossed the hall, and she was still

smiling as she waved to me from her motor. But then, Loder—then, as I stood in the hall, it all came to me suddenly. I remembered that Lillian must have been alone in the morning room before Eve found her! I remembered the telegram! I ran back to the room, meaning to question Eve as to how long Lillian had been alone, but she had left the room. I ran to the bureau—but the telegram wasn't there!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, gone. That's why I've come straight here."

For a moment they confronted each other. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, Loder pushed Chilcote aside and crossed the room. An instant later the opening and shutting of doors, the hasty pulling out of drawers and moving of boxes came from the bedroom.

Chilcote, shaken and nervous, stood for a minute where his companion had left him. At last, impelled by curiosity, he too crossed the narrow passage and entered the second room.

The full light streamed in through the open window; the keen spring air blew freshly across the house-tops, and on the window sill a band of grimy, joyous sparrows twittered and preened themselves. In the middle of the room stood Loder. His coat was off, and round him on chairs and floor lay an array of waistcoats, gloves and ties.

For a space Chilcote stood in the doorway staring at him, then his lips parted and he took a step forward.

"Loder," he said anxiously, "Loder, what are you going to do?"

Loder turned. His shoulders were stiff, his face alight with energy. "I'm going back," he said, "to unravel the tangle you have made."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LODER'S plan of action was arrived at before he reached Trafalgar square. The facts of the case were simple. Chilcote had left an incriminating telegram on the bureau in the morning room at Grosvenor square. By an unlucky chance Lillian Astrupp had been shown up into that room, where she had re-

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