

THE Masquerader

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

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(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XXXI.

A FEW minutes before the curtain fell on the second act of "Other Men's Shoes" Loder rose from his seat and made his apologies to Lillian.

At any other moment he might have pondered over her manner of accepting them—the easy indifference with which she let him go. But vastly keener issues were claiming his attention, issues whose results were wide and black.

He left the theater and, refusing the overtures of cabmen, set himself to walk to Chilcote's house. His face was hard and emotionless as he hurried forward, but the chaos in his mind found expression in the unevenness of his pace. To a strong man the confronting of difficulties is never alarming and is often fraught with inspiration, but this applies essentially to the difficulties evolved through the weakness, the folly or the force of another; when they arise from within the matter is of another character. It is in presence of his own soul, and in that presence alone, that a man may truly measure himself.

As Loder walked onward, treading the whole familiar length of traffic-filled street, he realized for the first time that he was standing before that solemn tribunal—the hour had come when he must answer to himself for himself. The longer and deeper an oblivion the more painful the awakening. For months the song of self had beaten about his ears, deadening all other sounds; now abruptly that song had ceased, not considerably, not lingeringly, but with a suddenness that made the succeeding silence very terrible.

He walked onward, keeping his direction unseeing. He was passing through the fire as surely as though actual flames rose about his feet, and whatever the result, whatever the fiber of the man who emerged from the ordeal, the John Loder who had hewn his way through the past weeks would exist no more. The triumphant egotist, the strong man who by his own strength had kept his eyes upon one point, refusing to see in other directions, had ceased to be.

Keen though it was, his realization of this crisis in his life had come with characteristic slowness. When Lillian Astrupp had given her dictum, when the music of the orchestra had ceased and the curtain risen on the second act of the play, nothing but a sense of stupefaction had filled his mind. In that moment the great song was silenced, not by any portentous episode, not by any incident that could have lent dignity to its end, but, with the full measure of life's irony, by a trivial social commonplace. In the first sensation of blank loss his faculties had been numbed. In the quarter of an hour that followed the rise of the curtain he had sat staring at the stage, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, filled with the enormity of the void that suddenly surrounded him. Then from habit, from constitutional tendency, he had begun slowly and perseveringly to draw first one thread and then another from the tangle of his thoughts, to forge with doubt and difficulty the chain that was to draw him toward the future.

It was upon this same incomplete and yet tenacious chain that his mind worked as he traversed the familiar streets and at last gained the house he had so easily learned to call home.

As he inserted the latchkey and felt it move smoothly in the lock a momentary revolt against his own judgment, his own censorship, swung him sharply toward reaction. But it is only the blind who can walk without a tremor on the edge of an abyss, and there was no longer a bandage across his eyes. The reaction flared up like a strip of lighted paper; then, like a strip of lighted paper, it dropped back to ashes. He pushed the door open and slowly crossed the hall.

The mounting of a staircase is often the index to a man's state of mind. As Loder ascended the stairs of Chilcote's house his shoulders lacked their stiffness, his head was no longer erect. He moved as though his feet were weighted. He had ceased to be the man of achievement whose smallest opinion compels consideration. In the privacy of solitude he was the mere human flotsam to which he had once compared himself—the flotsam that, dreaming it has found a harbor, wakes to find itself the prey of the incoming tide.

He paused at the head of the stairs to rally his resolutions. Then, still walking heavily, he passed down the corridor to Eve's room. It was suggestive of his character that, having made his

decision, he did not dally over its performance. Without waiting to knock, he turned the handle and walked into the room.

It looked precisely as it always looked, but to Loder the rich, subdued coloring of books and flowers—the whole air of culture and repose that the place conveyed—seemed to hold a deeper meaning than before, and it was on the instant that his eyes, crossing the inanimate objects, rested on their owner that the true force of his position, the enormity of the task before him, made itself plain. Realization came to him with vivid, overwhelming force, and it must be accounted to his credit in the summing of his qualities that then, in that moment of trial, the thought of retreat, the thought of yielding, did not present itself.

Eve was standing by the mantelpiece. She wore a beautiful gown, a long string of diamonds was twisted about her neck, and her soft, black hair was coiled high after a foreign fashion and held in place by a large diamond comb. As he entered she turned hastily, almost nervously, and looked at him with the rapid, searching glance he had learned to expect from her. Then almost directly her expression changed to one of quick concern. With a faint exclamation of alarm she stepped forward.

"What has happened?" she said.

"You look like a ghost."

Loder made no answer. Moving into the room, he paused by the oak table that stood between the fireplace and the door.

They made an unconscious tableau as they stood there—he with his hard, set face, she with her heightened color, her inexplicably bright eyes. They stood completely silent for a space—a space that for Loder held no suggestion of time. Then, finding the tension unbearable, Eve spoke again.

"Has anything happened?" she asked. "Is anything wrong?"

Had he been less engrossed the intensity of her concern might have struck him, but in a mind so harassed as his there was only room for one consideration—the consideration of himself. The sense of her question reached him, but its significance left him untouched.

"Is anything wrong?" she reiterated for the second time.

By an effort he raised his eyes. No man, he thought, since the beginning of the world was ever set a task so cruel as his. Painfully and slowly his lips parted.

"Everything in the world is wrong," he said in a slow, hard voice.

Eve said nothing, but her color suddenly deepened.

Again Loder was unobservant, but with the dogged resolution that marked him he forced himself to his task.

"You despise lies," he said at last.

"Tell me what you would think of a man whose whole life was one elaborated lie." The words were slightly exaggerated, but their utterance, their painfully brusque sincerity, precluded all suggestion of effect. Resolutely holding her gaze, he repeated his question.

"Tell me! Answer me! I want to know."

Eve's attitude was difficult to read. She stood twisting the string of diamonds between her fingers.

"Tell me!" he said again.

She continued to look at him for a moment; then, as if some fresh impulse moved her, she turned away from him toward the fire.

"I cannot," she said. "We—I—I could not set myself to judge—any one."

Loder held himself rigidly in hand.

"Eve," he said quietly, "I was at the Arcadian tonight. The play was 'Other Men's Shoes.' I suppose you've read the book 'Other Men's Shoes?'"

She was leaning on the mantelpiece, and her face was invisible to him. "Yes, I have read it," she said without looking round.

"It is the story of an extraordinary likeness between two men. Do you believe such a likeness possible? Do you think such a thing could exist?" He spoke with difficulty. His brain and tongue both felt numb.

Eve let the diamond chain slip from her fingers. "Yes," she said nervously. "Yes, I do believe it. Such things have been."

Loder caught at the words. "You're quite right," he said quickly. "You're quite right. The thing is possible. I've proved it. I know a man so like me that you, even you, could not tell us apart."

Eve was silent, still averting her face.

In dire difficulty he labored on.

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"Eve," he began once more, "such a likeness is a serious thing—a terrible danger, a terrible temptation. Those who have no experience of it cannot possibly gauge its pitfalls"—Again he paused, but again the silent figure by the fireplace gave him no help.

"Eve," he exclaimed suddenly, "if you only knew, if you only guessed what I'm trying to say"—The perplexity, the whole harassed suffering of his mind showed in the words. Loder, the strong, the resourceful, the self-contained, was palpably, painfully at a loss. There was almost a note of appeal in the vibration of his voice.

And Eve, standing by the fireplace, heard and understood. In that moment of comprehension all that had held her silent, all the conflicting motives that had forbidden speech, melted away before the unconscious demand for help. Quietly and yet quickly she turned, her whole face transfigured by a light that seemed to shine from within—something singularly soft and tender.

"There's no need to say anything," she said simply, "because I know."

It came quietly, as most great revelations come. Her voice was low and free from any excitement, her face beautiful in its complete unconsciousness of self. In that supreme moment all her thought, all her sympathy, was for the man—and his suffering.

To Loder there was a space of incredulity; then his brain slowly swung to realization. "You know?" he repeated blankly. "You know?"

Without answering, she walked to a cabinet that stood in the window, unlocked a drawer and drew out several sheets of flimsy white paper, crumpled in places and closely covered with writing. Without a word she carried them back and held them out.

He took them in silence, scanned them, then looked up.

In a long, worthless pause their eyes met. It was as if each looked speechlessly into the other's heart, seeing the passions, the contradictions, the shortcomings, that went to the making of both. In that silence they drew closer together than they could have done through a torrent of words. There was no asking of forgiveness, no elaborate confession, on either side. In the deep, eloquent pause they mutually saw and mutually understood.

"When I came into the morning room

today," Eve said at last, "and saw Lillian Astrupp reading that telegram nothing could have seemed farther from me than the thought that I should follow her example. It was not until afterward—not until she came into the room—until I saw that you, as I believed, had fallen back again from what I respected to what I despised—that I knew how human I really was. As I watched them laugh and talk I felt suddenly that I was alone again—terribly alone. I—I think—I believe I was jealous in that moment"—She hesitated.

"Eve!" he exclaimed.

But she broke in quickly on the word. "I felt different in that moment. I didn't care about honor or things like honor. After they had gone it seemed to me that I had missed something—something that they possessed. Oh, you don't know what a woman feels when she is jealous!" Again she paused. "It was then that the telegram and the thought of Lillian's amused smile as she had read it came

to my mind. Feeling as I did—acting on what I felt—I crossed to the bureau and picked it up. In one second I had seen enough to make it impossible to draw back. Oh, it may have been dishonorable, it may have been mean, but I wonder if any woman in the world would have done otherwise! I crumpled up the papers just as they were and carried them to my own room."

From the first to the last word of Eve's story Loder's eyes never left her face. Instantly she had finished his voice broke forth in irrepressible question. In that wonderful space of time he had learned many things. All his deductions, all his apprehensions, had been scattered and disproved. He had seen the true meaning of Lillian Astrupp's amused indifference—the indifference of a variable, flippant nature that, robbed of any real weapon for mischief, soon tires of a game that promises to be too arduous. He saw all this and understood it with a rapidity born of the moment; nevertheless, when Eve ceased to speak the question that broke from him was not connected with this great discovery—was not even suggestive of it. It was something quite immaterial to any real issue, but something that overshadowed every consideration in the world.

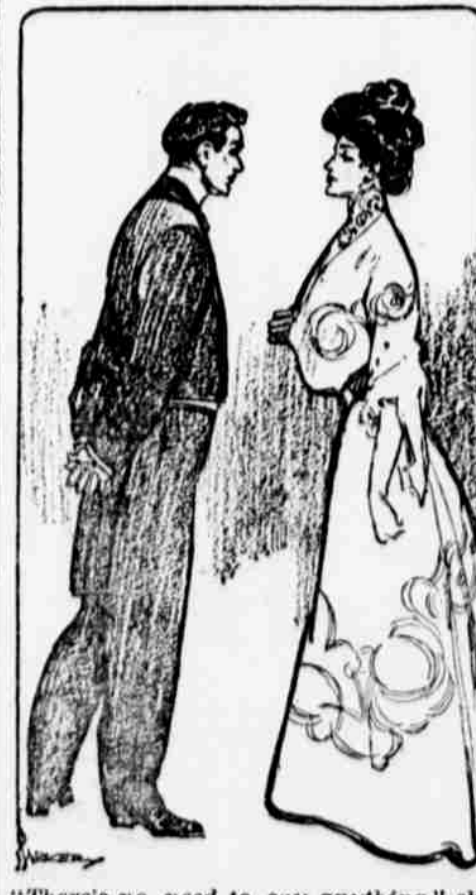
"Eve," he said, "tell me your first thought—your first thought after the shock and the surprise—when you remembered me."

There was a fresh pause, but one of very short duration; then Eve met his glance fearlessly and frankly. The same pride and dignity, the same indescribable tenderness that had responded to his first appeal, shone in her face.

"My first thought was a great thankfulness," she said simply. "A thankfulness that you—that no man—could ever understand."

CHAPTER XXXII.

AS she finished speaking Eve did not lower her eyes. To her there was no suggestion of shame in her thoughts or her words, but to Loder, watching and listening, there was a perilous meaning contained in both.



"There's no need to say anything," she said simply.

(Continued on Page Six.)