

THE Masquerader

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Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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CHAPTER I.

TWO incidents, widely different in character yet bound together by results, marked the night of Jan. 23. On that night the blackest fog within a four years' memory fell upon certain portions of London and also on that night came the first announcement of the border risings against the Persian government in the province of Khorassan—the announcement that, speculated upon, even smiled at, at the time, assumed such significance in the light of after events.

At 8 o'clock the news spread through the house of commons, but at 9 men in the inner lobbies were gossiping, not so much upon how far Russia, while ostensibly upholding the shah, had pulled the strings by which the insurgents danced, as upon the manner in which the St. George's Gazette, the Tory evening newspaper, had seized upon the incident and shaken it in the faces of the government.

More than once before Lakely, the owner and editor of the St. George's, had stepped outside the decorous circle of tradition and taken a plunge into modern journalism, but tonight he essayed deeper waters than before and under an almost sensational heading declared that in this apparently innocent border rising we had less an outcome of mere racial antagonism than a first faint index of a long cherished Russian scheme, growing to a gradual maturity under the "drift" policy of the present British government.

The effect produced by this pronouncement, if strong, was varied. Members of the opposition saw, or thought they saw, a reflection of it in the smiling unconcern on the ministerial benches, and the government had an uneasy sense that behind the newly kindled interest on the other side of the house lay some mysterious scenting of battle from afar off. But though these impressions ran like electricity through the atmosphere, nothing tangible marked their passage, and the ordinary business of the house proceeded until half past 11, when an adjournment was moved.

The first man to hurry from his place was John Chilcote, member for East Wark. He passed out of the house quickly, with the half furtive quickness that marks a self absorbed man, and as he passed the policeman standing stolidly under the arched doorway of the big courtyard he averted a little, as if startled out of his thoughts. He realized his swerve almost before it was accomplished and pulled himself together with nervous irritability.

"Foggy night, constable," he said, with elaborate carelessness.

"Foggy night, sir, and thickening up west," responded the man.

"Ah, indeed!" Chilcote's answer was absent. The constable's cheery voice jarred on him, and for the second time he was conscious of senseless irritation. Without a further glance at the man, he slipped out into the courtyard and turned toward the main gate.

At the gateway two cab lamps showed through the mist of shifting fog like the eyes of a great cat, and the familiar "Hansom, sir?" came to him indistinctly.

He passed by force of custom and, stepping forward, had almost touched the open door when a new impulse caused him to draw back.

"No," he said hurriedly; "no. I'll walk."

The cabman muttered, lashed his horse and, with a clatter of hoofs and harness, wheeled away, while Chilcote, still with uncertain hastiness, crossed the road in the direction of Whitehall.

About the abbey the fog had partially lifted, and in the railed garden that faces the houses of parliament the statues were visible in a spectral way. But Chilcote's glance was unstable and indifferent. He skirted the railings heedlessly and, crossing the road with the speed of long familiarity, gained Whitehall on the left hand side.

There the fog had dropped, and, looking upward toward Trafalgar square, it seemed that the chain of lamps extended little farther than the Horse guards and that beyond lay nothing.

Unconscious of this capricious alternation between darkness and light, Chilcote continued his course. To a close observer the manner of his going had both interest and suggestion, for though he walked on, apparently self engrossed, yet at every dozen steps he started at some sound or some touch, like a man whose nervous system is painfully overstrung.

Maintaining his haste, he went deliberately forward, oblivious of the fact that at each step the curtain of

darkness about him became closer, damper, more tangible; that at each second the passersby jostled each other with greater frequency. Then, abruptly, with a sudden realization of what had happened, he stood quite still. Without anticipation or preparation he had walked full into the thickness of the fog—a thickness so dense that, as by an enchanter's wand, the figures of a moment before melted, the street lamps were sucked up into the night.

His first feeling was a sense of panic at the sudden isolation, his second a thrill of nervous apprehension at the oblivion that had allowed him to be so entrapped. The second feeling outweighed the first. He moved forward, then paused again, uncertain of himself. Finally, with the consciousness that inaction was unbearable, he moved on once more, his eyes wide open, one hand thrust out as a protection and guide.

The fog had closed in behind him as heavily as in front, shutting off all possibility of retreat. All about him in the darkness was a confusion of voices—cheerful, dubious, alarmed or angry. Now and then a sleeve brushed his or a hand touched him tentatively. It was a strange moment, a moment of possibilities, to which the crunching wheels, the oaths and laughter from the blocked traffic of the roadway, made a continuous accompaniment.

Keeping well to the left Chilcote still beat on. There was a persistence in his movements that almost amounted to fear—a fear born of solitude filled with innumerable sounds. For a space he groped about him without result, then his fingers touched the cold surface of a shuttered shop front and a thrill of reassurance passed through him. With renewed haste and clinging to his landmark as a blind man might, he started forward with fresh impetus.

For a dozen paces he moved rapidly and unevenly, then the natural result occurred. He collided with a man coming in the opposite direction.

The shock was abrupt. Both men swore simultaneously, then both laughed. The whole thing was casual, but Chilcote was in that state of mind when even the commonplace becomes abnormal. The other man's exclamation, the other man's laugh, struck on his nerves. Coming out of the darkness, they sounded like a repetition of his own.

Nine out of every ten men in London, given the same social position and the same education, might reasonably be expected to express annoyance or amusement in the same manner, possibly in the same tone of voice, and Chilcote remembered this almost at the moment of his nervous jar.

"Beastly fog!" he said aloud. "I'm trying to find Grosvenor square, but the chances seem rather small."

The other laughed again, and again the laugh upset Chilcote. He wondered uncomfortably if he was becoming a prey to illusions. But the stranger spoke before the question had solved itself.

"I'm afraid they are small," he said. "It would be almost hard to find one's way to the devil on a night like this."

Chilcote made a murmur of amusement and drew back against the shop.

"Yes. We can see now where the blind man scores in the matter of salvation. This is almost a repetition of the fog of six years ago. Were you out in that?" It was a habit of his to jump from one sentence to another, a habit that had grown of late.

"No." The stranger had also groped his way to the shop front. "No, I was out of England six years ago."

"You were lucky," Chilcote turned up the collar of his coat. "It was an atrocious fog, as black as this, but more universal. I remember it well. It was the night Lexington made his great sugar speech. Some of us were found on Lambeth bridge at 3 in the morning, having left the house at 12."

Chilcote seldom indulged in reminiscences, but this conversation with an unseen companion was more like a soliloquy than a dialogue. He was almost surprised into an exclamation when the other caught up his words.

"Ah! The sugar speech!" he said. "Odd that I should have been looking it up only yesterday. What a magnificent dressing up of a dry subject it was! What a career Lexington promised in those days!"

Chilcote changed his position.

"You are interested in the middle down at Westminster?" he asked sarcastically.

"I?" It was the turn of the stranger to draw back a step. "Oh, I read my newspaper with the other 5,000,000, that is all. I am an outsider." His

voice sounded curt. The warmth that admiration had brought into it a moment before had frozen abruptly.

"An outsider!" Chilcote repeated. "What an enviable word!"

"Possibly, to those who are well inside the ring. But let us go back to Lexington. What a pinnacle the man reached, and what a drop he had! It has always seemed to me an extraordinary instance of the human leaven running through us all. What was the real cause of his collapse?" he asked suddenly. "Was it drugs or drink? I have often wished to get at the truth."

Again Chilcote changed his attitude. "Is truth ever worth getting at?" he asked irrelevantly.

"In the case of a public man—yes. He exchanges his privacy for the interest of the masses. If he gives the masses the details of his success, why not the details of his failure? But was it drink that sucked him under?"

"No." Chilcote's response came after a pause.

"Drugs?"

Again Chilcote hesitated. And at the moment of his indecision a woman brushed past him laughing boisterously. The sound jarred him.

"Was it drugs?" the stranger went on easily. "I have always had a theory that it was."

"Yes. It was morphia." The answer came before Chilcote had realized it. The woman's laugh at the stranger's quiet persistence had contrived to draw it from him. Instantly he had spoken he looked about him quickly, like one who has for a moment forgotten a necessary vigilance.

There was silence while the stranger thought over the information just given him. Then he spoke again, with a new touch of vehemence.

"So I imagined," he said, "though, on my soul, I never really credited it. To have gained so much and to have thrown it away for a common vice!" He made an exclamation of disgust.

Chilcote gave an unsteady laugh. "You judge hardly," he said.

The other repeated his sound of contempt. "Justly so. No man has the right to squander what another would give his soul for. It lessens the general respect for power."

"You are a believer in power?" The tone was sarcastic, but the sarcasm sounded thin.

"Yes. All power is the outcome of individuality, either past or present. I find no sentiment for the man who plays with it."

The quiet contempt of the tone stung Chilcote.

"Do you imagine that Lexington made no fight?" he asked impulsively. "Can't you picture the man's struggle while the vice that had been slave gradually became master?" He stopped to take breath, and in the cold pause that followed it seemed to him that the other made a murmur of incredulity.

"Perhaps you think of morphia as a pleasure," he added. "Think of it, instead, as a tyrant that tortures the mind if held to and the body if cast off." Urged by the darkness and the silence of his companion, the rein of his speech had loosened. In that moment he was not Chilcote, the member for East Wark, whose moods and silences were proverbial, but Chilcote the man whose mind craved the relief of speech.

"You talk as the world talks—out of ignorance and self righteousness," he went on. "Before you condemn Lexington you should put yourself in his place."

"As you do?" the other laughed.

Unsuspecting and inoffensive as the laugh was it startled Chilcote. With a sudden alarm he pulled himself up.

"I?" He tried to echo the laugh, but the attempt fell flat. "Oh, I merely speak from—from De Quincey. But I believe this fog is shifting—I really believe it is shifting. Can you oblige me with a light? I had almost forgotten that a man may still smoke though he has been deprived of sight." He spoke fast and disjointedly. He was overwhelmed by the idea that he had let himself go and possessed by the wish to obliterate the consequences. As he talked he fumbled for his cigarette case.

His head was bent as he searched for it nervously. Without looking up he was conscious that the cloud of fog that held him prisoner was lifting, rolling away, closing back again, preparatory to final disappearance. Having found the case, he put a cigarette between his lips and raised his hand at the moment that the stranger drew a match across his box.

For a second each stared blankly at the other's face, suddenly made visible by the lifting of the fog. The match in the stranger's hand burned down till it scorched his fingers, and, feeling the pain, he laughed and let it drop.

"Of all odd things!" he said. Then he broke off. The circumstance was too novel for ordinary remark.

By one of those rare occurrences, those chances that seem too wild for real life and yet belong to no other sphere, the two faces so strangely hidden and strangely revealed were identical, feature for feature. It seemed to each man that he looked not at the face of another, but at his own face reflected in a flawless looking glass.

Of the two the stranger was the first

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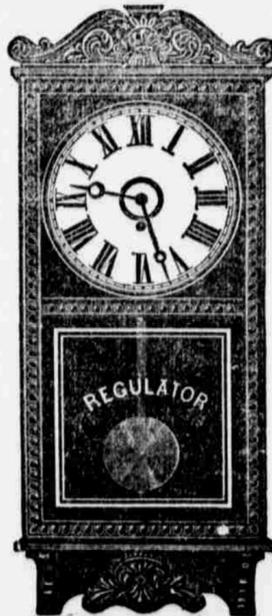
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