

# THE Masquerader

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

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"What have you been doing?" she asked after a moment. "I thought I was quite forgotten." She moved across to the couch, picked up the kitten and kissed it. "Isn't this sweet?" she added.

She looked very graceful as she turned, holding the little animal up. She was a woman of twenty-seven, but she looked a girl. The outline of her face was pure, the pale gold of her hair almost ethereal, and her tall, slight figure still suggested the suppleness, the possibility of future development, that belong to youth. She wore a lace colored gown that harmonized with the room and with the delicacy of her skin.

"Now sit down and rest or walk about the room. I shan't mind which," she nestled into the couch and picked up the crystal ball.

"What is the toy for?" Chilcote looked at her from the mantelpiece, against which he was resting. He had never defined the precise attraction that Lillian Astrupp held for him. Her shallowness soothed him; her inconsequent egotism helped him to forget himself. She never asked him how he was, she never expected impossibilities. She let him come and go and act as he pleased, never demanding reasons. Like the kitten, she was charming and graceful and easily amused. It was possible that, also like the kitten, she could scratch and be spiteful on occasion, but that did not weigh with him. He sometimes expressed a vague envy of the late Lord Astrupp, but even had circumstances permitted it is doubtful whether he would have chosen to be his successor. Lillian as a friend was delightful, but Lillian as a wife would have been a different consideration.

"What is the toy for?" he asked again.

She looked up slowly. "How cruel of you, Jack! It is my very latest hobby."

It was part of her attraction that she was never without a craze. Each new one was as fleeting as the last, but to each she brought the same delightfully insincere enthusiasm, the same picturesque devotion. Each was a pose, but she posed so sweetly that nobody lost patience.

"You mustn't laugh!" she protested, letting the kitten slip to the ground. "I've had lessons at 5 guineas each from the most fascinating person—a professional—and I'm becoming quite an adept. Of course I haven't been much beyond the milky appearance yet, but the milky appearance is everything, you know. The rest will come. I am trying to persuade Blanche to let me have a pavilion at her party in March and gaze for all you dull political people." And she smiled.

Chilcote smiled as well. "How is it done?" he asked, momentarily amused. "Oh, the doing is quite delicious. You sit at a table with the ball in front of you. Then you take the subject's hands, spread them out on the table and stroke them very softly while you gaze into the crystal. That gets up the sympathy, you know." She looked up innocently. "Shall I show you?"

Chilcote moved a small table nearer to the couch and spread his hands upon it, palms downward. "Like this, eh?" he said. Then a ridiculousness seized him, and he moved away. "Some other day," he said quickly. "You can show me some other day. I'm not very fit this afternoon."

If Lillian felt any disappointment she showed none. "Poor old thing!" she said softly. "Try to sit here by me and we won't bother about anything." She made a place for him beside her, and as he dropped into it she took his hand and patted it sympathetically.

The touch was soothing, and he bore it patiently enough. After a moment she lifted the hand with a little exclamation of reproof.

"You degenerate person! You have ceased to manure. What has become of my excellent training?"

Chilcote laughed. "Run to seed," he said lightly. Then his expression and tone changed. "When a man gets to my age," he added, "little social luxuries don't seem worth while. The social necessities are irksome enough. Personally I envy the beggar in the street—exempt from shaving, exempt from washing."

Lillian raised her delicate eyebrows. The sentiment was beyond her perception.

"But manuring," she said reproachfully, "when you have such nice hands. It was your hands and your eyes, you know, that first appealed to me." She sighed gently, with a touch of sentimental remembrance. "And I thought it so strong of you not to wear rings.

It must be such a temptation." She looked down at her own fingers, glittering with jewels.

But the momentary pleasure of her touch was gone. Chilcote drew away his hand and picked up the book that lay between them.

"Other Men's Shoes," he read. "A novel, of course?"

She smiled. "Of course. Such a fantastic story—two men changing identities!"

Chilcote rose and walked back to the mantelpiece.

"Changing identities," he said, with a touch of interest.

"Yes. One man is an artist, the other a millionaire. One wants to know what fame is like, the other wants to know how it feels to be really sinfully rich. So they exchange experiences for a month." She laughed.

Chilcote laughed as well. "But how?" he asked.

"Oh, I told you the idea was absurd. Fancy two people so much alike that neither their friends nor their servants see any difference! Such a thing couldn't be, could it?"

Chilcote looked down at the fire. "No," he said doubtfully. "No, I suppose not."

"Of course not. There are likenesses, but not freak likenesses like that."

Chilcote's head was bent as he spoke, but at the last words he lifted it.

"By Jove! I don't know about that!" he said. "Not so very long ago I saw two men so much alike that I—I—He stopped.

Lillian smiled.

He colored quickly. "You doubt me?" he asked.

"My dear Jack!" Her voice was delicately reproachful.

"Then you think that my—my imagination has been playing me tricks?"

"My dear boy! Nothing of the kind. Come back to your place and tell me the whole tale?" She smiled again, and patted the couch invitingly.

But Chilcote's balance had been upset. For the first time he saw Lillian as one of the watchful, suspecting crowd before which he was constantly on guard. Acting on the sensation, he moved suddenly toward the door.

"I—I have an appointment at the house," he said quickly. "I'll look in another day when—when I'm better company. I know I'm a bear today. My nerves, you know." He came back to the couch and took her hand. Then



"Other Men's Shoes," he read.

he touched her cheek for an instant with his fingers.

"Goodby," he said. "Take care of yourself—and the kitten," he added with forced gaiety, as he crossed the room.

That afternoon Chilcote's nervous condition reached its height. All day he had avoided the climax, but no evasion can be eternal, and this he realized as he sat in his place on the opposite benches during the half hour of wintry twilight that precedes the turning on of the lights. He realized it in that half hour, but the application of the knowledge followed later, when the time came for him to question the government on some point relating to the proposed additional dry dock at Talkley, the naval base. Then for the first time he knew that the sufferings of the past months could have a visible as well as a hidden side—could disorganize his daily routine as they had already demoralized his will and character.

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|--|-----|
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| 36-inch All Wool Venetian Dress Goods, at  | 50c |
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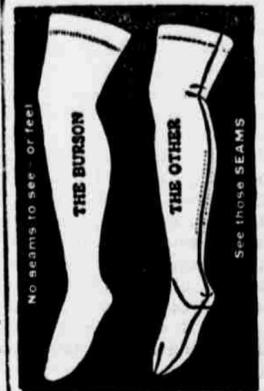
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The thing came upon him with extraordinary lack of preparation. He sat through the twilight with tolerable calm, his nervousness showing only in the occasional lifting of his hand to his collar and the frequent changing of his position, but when the lights were turned on and he leaned back in his seat with closed eyes he became conscious of a curious impression—a disturbing idea that through his closed lids he could see the faces on the opposite side of the house, see the rows of eyes, sleepy, interested or vigilant. Never before had the sensation presented itself, but once set up it ran through all his susceptibilities. By an absurd freak of fancy those varying eyes seemed to pierce through his lids, almost through his eyeballs. The cold perspiration that was his daily horror broke out on his forehead, and at the same moment Fraide, his leader, turned, leaned over the back of his seat and touched his knee.

Chilcote started and opened his eyes. "I—I believe I was dozing," he said confusedly.

Fraide smiled his dry, kindly smile. "A fatal admission for a member of the opposition," he said. "But I was looking for you earlier in the day, Chilcote. There is something behind this Persian affair. I believe it to be a mere first move on Russia's part. You big trading people will find it worth watching."

Chilcote shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "I scarcely believe in it. Lately put a match to the powder in the St. George's, but 'twill only be a noise and a puff of smoke."

But Fraide did not smile. "What is the feeling down at Wark?" he asked. "Has it awakened any interest?"

"At Wark? Oh, I—I don't quite know. I have been a little out of touch with Wark in the last few weeks. A man has so many private affairs to look to— He was uneasy under his chief's scrutiny.

Fraide's lips parted as if to make reply, but with a certain dignified reticence he closed them again and turned away.

Chilcote leaned back in his place and furtively passed his hand over his forehead. His mind was possessed by one consideration—the consideration of

(Continued on Page Six.)

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