

THE Masquerader

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

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Again Loder took his face between his hands.

"Don't ridicule the idea. I'm in dead earnest."

Loder said nothing.

"Think—think it over before you refuse."

For a moment Loder remained motionless, then he rose suddenly, pushing back his chair.

"Tush, man! You don't know what you say. The fact of your being married bars it. Can't you see that?"

Again Chilcote caught his arm.

"You misunderstand," he said. "You mistake the position. I tell you my wife and I are nothing to each other. She goes her way; I go mine. We have our own friends, our own rooms. Marriage, actual marriage, doesn't enter the question. We meet occasionally at meals and at other people's houses; sometimes we go out together for the sake of appearances; beyond that, nothing. If you take up my life nobody in it will trouble you less than Eve—I can promise that." He laughed unsteadily.

Loder's face remained unmoved. "Even granting that," he said, "the thing is still impossible."

"Why?"

"There is the house. The position there would be untenable. A man is known there as he is known in his own club." He drew away from Chilcote's touch.

"Very possibly. Very possibly." Chilcote laughed quickly and excitedly. "But what club is without its eccentric member? I am glad you spoke of that. I am glad you raised that point. It was a long time ago that I hit upon a reputation for moods as a shield—for other things, and the more useful it has become the more I have let it grow. I tell you you might go down to the house tomorrow and spend the whole day without speaking to, even nodding to, a single man, and as long as you were I to outward appearances no one would raise an eyebrow. In the same way you might vote in my place, ask a question, make a speech if you wanted to."

At the word speech Loder turned involuntarily. For a fleeting second the coldness of his manner dropped and his face changed.

Chilcote, with his nervous quickness of perception, saw the alteration, and a new look crossed his own face.

"Why not?" he said quickly. "You once had ambitions in that direction. Why not renew the ambitions?"

"And drop back from the mountains into the gutter?" Loder smiled and slowly shook his head.

"Better to live for one day than to exist for a hundred!" Chilcote's voice trembled with anxiety. For the third time he extended his hand and touched the other.

This time Loder did not shake off the detaining hand. He scarcely seemed to feel its pressure.

"Look here," Chilcote's fingers tightened. "A little while ago you talked of influence. Here you can step into a position built by influence. You might do all you once hoped to do."

Loder suddenly lifted his head. "Absurd!" he said. "Absurd! Such a scheme was never carried through."

"Precisely why it will succeed. People never suspect until they have a precedent. Will you consider it? At least consider it. Remember, if there is a risk it is I who am running it. On your own showing you have no position to jeopardize."

The other laughed curtly. "Before I go tonight will you promise me to consider it?"

"No."

"Then you will send me your decision by wire tomorrow. I won't take your answer now."

Loder freed his arm abruptly. "Why not?" he asked.

Chilcote smiled nervously. "Because I know men and men's temptations. We are all very strong till the quick is touched. Then we all wince. It's morphia with one man, ambitions with another. In each case it's only a matter of sooner or later." He laughed in his satirical, unstrung way and held out his hand. "You have my address," he said. "Au revoir."

Loder pressed the hand and dropped it. "Goodbye," he said meaningly. Then he crossed the room quietly and held the door open. "Goodbye," he said again as the other passed him.

As he crossed the threshold Chilcote paused. "Au revoir," he corrected, with emphasis.

Until the last echo of his visitor's steps had died away Loder stood with his hand on the door. Then closing it quietly he turned and looked around the room. For a considerable space he stood there as if weighing the merits of

each object. Then very slowly he moved to one of the bookshelves, drew out May's "Parliamentary Practice," and, carrying it to the desk, readjusted the lamp.

CHAPTER VI.

ALL the next day Chilcote moved in a fever of excitement. Hot with hope one moment, cold with fever the next, he rushed with restless energy into every task that presented itself, only to drop it as speedily. Twice during the morning he drove to the entrance of Clifford's inn, but each time his courage failed him and he returned to Grosvenor square to learn that the expected message from Loder had not come.

It was a wearing condition of mind, but at worst it was scarcely more than an exaggeration of what his state had been for months and made but little obvious difference in his bearing or manner.

In the afternoon he took his place in the house, but, though it was his first appearance since his failure of two days ago, he drew but small personal notice. When he chose, his manner could repel advances with extreme effect, and of late men had been prone to draw away from him.

In one of the lobbies he encountered Fraide surrounded by a group of friends. With his usual furtive haste he would have passed on, but moving away from his party the old man accosted him. He was always courteously particular in his treatment of Chilcote, as the husband of his ward and god-child.

"Better, Chilcote," he said, holding out his hand. At the sound of the low, rather formal tones, so characteristic of the old statesman, a hundred memories rose to Chilcote's mind, a hundred hours distasteful in the living and unbearable in the recollection, and with them the new flash of hope, the new possibility of freedom. In a sudden rush of confidence he turned to his leader.

"I believe I've found a remedy for my nerves," he said. "I—I believe I'm going to be a new man." He laughed with a touch of excitement.

Fraide pressed his fingers kindly. "That is right," he said. "That is right. I called at Grosvenor square this morning, but Eve told me your illness of the other day was not serious. She was very busy this morning. She could only spare me a quarter of an hour. She is indefatigable over the social side of your prospects, Chilcote. You owe her a large debt. A popular wife means a great deal to a politician."

The steady eyes of his companion disturbed Chilcote.

He drew away his hand.

"Eve is unique," he said vaguely.

Fraide smiled. "That is right," he said again. "Admiration is too largely excluded from modern marriages." And with a courteous excuse he rejoined his friends.

It was dinner time before Chilcote could desert the house, but the moment departure was possible he hurried to Grosvenor square.

As he entered the house the hall was empty. He swore fruitfully under his breath and pressed the nearest bell. Since his momentary exaltation in Fraide's presence his spirits had steadily fallen until now they hung at the lowest ebb.

As he waited in unconcealed impatience for an answer to his summons he caught sight of his man Allsopp at the head of the stairs.

"Come here!" he called, pleased to find some one upon whom to vent his irritation. "Has that wire come for me?"

"No, sir. I inquired five minutes back."

"Inquire again."

"Yes, sir." Allsopp disappeared.

A second later after his disappearance the bell of the hall door whizzed loudly.

Chilcote started. All sudden sounds, like all strong lights, affected him. He half moved to the door, then stopped himself with a short exclamation. At the same instant Allsopp reappeared.

Chilcote turned on him excitedly.

"What the devil's the meaning of this?" he said. "A battery of servants in the house and nobody to open the hall door?"

Allsopp looked embarrassed. "Crap-ham is coming directly, sir. He only left the hall to ask Jeffries."

Chilcote turned. "Confound Crap-ham!" he exclaimed. "Go and open the door yourself."

Allsopp hesitated, his dignity struggling with his obedience. As he waited the bell sounded again.

"Did you hear me?" Chilcote said.

"Yes, sir." Allsopp crossed the hall.

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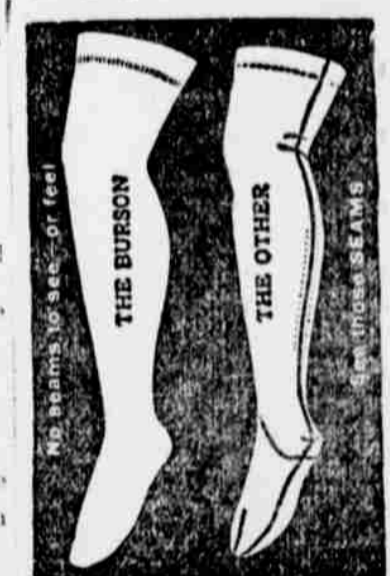
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As the door was opened Chilcote passed his handkerchief from one hand to the other in the tension of hope and fear, then as the sound of his own name in the shrill tones of a telegraph boy reached his ears he let the handkerchief drop to the ground.

Allsopp took the yellow envelope and carried it to his master.

"A telegram, sir," he said. "And the boy wishes to know if there is an answer." Picking up Chilcote's handkerchief, he turned aside with elaborate dignity.

Chilcote's hands were so unsteady that he could scarcely insert his finger under the flap of the envelope. Tearing off a corner, he wrenched the covering apart and smoothed out the flimsy pink paper.

The message was very simple, consisting of but seven words:

Shall expect you at 11 tonight.

Loder.

He read it two or three times, then he looked up. "No answer," he said mechanically, and to his own ears the relief in his voice sounded harsh and unnatural.

Exactly as the clocks chimed 11 Chilcote mounted the stairs to Loder's rooms. But this time there was more of haste than of uncertainty in his steps, and, reaching the landing, he crossed it in a couple of strides and knocked feverishly on the door.

It opened at once, and Loder stood before him.

The occasion was peculiar. For a moment neither spoke; each involuntarily looked at the other with new eyes and under changed conditions. Each had assumed a fresh standpoint in the other's thought. The passing astonishment, the half impersonal curiosity that had previously tinged their relationship, was cast aside, never to be reassumed. In each the other saw himself—and something more.

As usual, Loder was the first to recover himself.

"I was expecting you," he said.

"Won't you come in?"

The words were almost the same as his word of the night before, but his voice had a different ring, just as his face when he drew back into the room had a different expression—a suggestion of decision and energy that had been lacking before. Chilcote caught the difference as he crossed the threshold, and for a bare second

a flicker of something like jealousy touched him, but the sensation was fleeting.

"I have to thank you," he said, holding out his hand. He was too well bred to show by a hint that he understood the drop in the other's principles, but Loder broke down the artifice.

"Let's be straight with each other, since everybody else has to be deceived," he said, taking the other's hand.

"You have nothing to thank me for, and you know it. It's a touch of the old Adam. You tempted me, and I fell." He laughed, but below the laugh ran a note of something like triumph—the curious triumph of a man who has known the tyranny of strength and suddenly appreciates the freedom of a weakness.

"You fully realize the thing you have proposed?" he added in a different tone. "It's not too late to retract even now."

Chilcote opened his lips, paused, then laughed in imitation of his companion, but the laugh sounded forced.

"My dear fellow," he said at last, "I never retract."

"Never?"

"No."

"Then the bargain's sealed."

Loder walked slowly across the room and, taking up his position by the mantelpiece, looked at his companion. The similarity between them as they faced each other seemed abnormal, defying even the closest scrutiny. And yet, so mysterious is nature even in her lapses, they were subtly, indefinitely different. Chilcote was Loder deprived of one essential; Loder, Chilcote with that essential bestowed. The difference lay neither in feature, in coloring nor in height, but in that baffling, elusive inner illumination that some call individuality and others soul.

Something of this idea, misted and tangled by nervous imagination, crossed Chilcote's mind in that moment of scrutiny, but he shrank from it apprehensively.

"I—I came to discuss details," he said quickly, crossing the space that divided him from his host. "Shall we?—Are you?" He paused uneasily.

"I'm entirely in your hands," Loder spoke with abrupt decision. Moving to the table, he indicated a chair and drew another forward for himself.

Both men sat down. Chilcote leaned forward, resting elbows on the table. "There will be several things to consider," he began nervously, looking across at the other.

"Quite so." Loder glanced back appreciatively. "I thought about those things the better part of last night. To begin with, I must study your handwriting. I guarantee to get it right, but it will take a month."

"A month?"

"Well, perhaps three weeks. We mustn't make a mess of things."

Chilcote shifted his position.

"Three weeks?" he repeated. "Couldn't you?"

"No, I couldn't." Loder spoke authoritatively. "I might never want to put pen to paper; but, on the other hand, I might have to sign a check one day." He laughed. "Have you ever thought of that—that I might have to, or want to, sign a check?"

"No, I confess that escaped me."

"You risk your fortune that you may keep the place it bought for you?" Loder laughed again. "How do you know that I am not a blackguard?" he added. "How do you know that I won't clear out one day and leave you high and dry? What is to prevent John Chilcote from realizing £40,000 or £50,000 and then making himself scarce?"

"You won't do that," Chilcote said, with unusual decision. "I told you your weakness last night, and it wasn't money. Money isn't the rock you'll split over."

"Then you think I'll split upon some rock? But that's beyond the question. To get to business again. You'll risk my studying your signature?"

Chilcote nodded.

"Right! Now item two." Loder counted on his fingers. "I must know the names and faces of your men friends as far as I can. Your woman friends don't count. While I'm you, you will be adamant." He laughed again pleasantly. "But the men are essential—the backbone of the whole business."

"I have no men friends. I don't trust the idea of friendship."

"Acquaintances, then."

Chilcote looked up sharply. "I think we score there," he said. "I have a reputation for absentmindedness that will carry you anywhere. They tell me

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