

# THE Masquerader

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Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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[CONTINUED.]

"Won't you sit down?" he said again, cutting short his thoughts with some confusion.

"Thank you." She gravely accepted the proffered chair. But he saw that without any ostentation she drew her skirts aside as she passed him. The action displeased him unaccountably.

"Well," he said shortly, "what had Fraide to say?" He walked to the mantelpiece with his customary movement and stood watching her. The instinct toward hiding his face had left him. Her instant and uninterested acceptance of him almost nettled him. His own half contemptuous impression of Chilcote came to him unpleasantly and with it the first desire to assert his own individuality. Stung by the conflicting emotions, he felt in Chilcote's pockets for something to smoke.

"Eve saw and interpreted the action. 'Are these your cigarettes?' She leaned toward a small table and took up a box made of lizard skin.

"Thanks." He took the box from her, and as it passed from one to the other he saw her glance at his rings. The glance was momentary. Her lips parted to express question or surprise, then closed again without comment. More than any spoken words the incident showed him the gulf that separated husband and wife.

"Well," he said again, "what about Fraide?"

At his words she sat straighter and looked at him more directly, as if bracing herself to a task.

"Mr. Fraide is—is as interested as ever in you," she began.

"Or in you?" Loder made the interruption precisely as he felt Chilcote would have made it. Then instantly he washed the words back.

Eve's warm skin colored more deeply. For a second the inscrutable underlying expression that puzzled him showed in her eyes, then she sank back into a corner of the chair.

"Why do you make such a point of sneering at my friends?" she asked quietly. "I overlook it when you are nervous." She halted slightly on the word. "But you are not nervous to-night."

Loder, to his great humiliation, reddened. Except for an occasional outburst on the part of Mrs. Robins, his charwoman, he had not merited a woman's displeasure for years.

"The sneer was unintentional," he said.

For the first time Eve showed a personal interest. She looked at him in a puzzled way. "If your apology was meant," she said hesitatingly, "I should be glad to accept it."

Loder, uncertain of how to take the words, moved back to the desk. He carried an unlighted cigarette between his fingers.

There was an interval in which neither spoke. Then at last, conscious of his awkwardness, Eve rose. With one hand on the back of her chair she looked at him.

"Mr. Fraide thinks it's such a pity that"—she stopped to choose her words—"that you should lose hold on things—lose interest in things—as you are doing. He has been thinking a good deal about you in the last three weeks, ever since the day of your illness in the home, and it seems to him"—again she broke off, watching Loder's averted

shake off your restlessness that your health might improve. He thinks that the present crisis would"—she hesitated—"would give you a tremendous opportunity. Your trade interests, bound up as they are with Persia, would give any opinion you might hold a double weight." Almost unconsciously a touch of warmth crept into her words.

"Mr. Fraide talked very seriously about the beginning of your career. He said that if only the spirit of your first days could come back"—Her tone grew quicker, as though she feared ridicule in Loder's silence. "He asked me to use my influence. I know that I have little—none, perhaps—but I couldn't tell him that, and so—so I promised."

"And have kept the promise?" Loder spoke at random. Her manner and her words had both affected him. There was a sensation of unreality in his brain.

"Yes," she answered. "I always want to do—what I can."

"As she spoke a sudden realization of the effort she was making struck upon him, and with it his scorn of Chilcote rose in renewed force.

"My intention"—he began, turning to her. Then the futility of any declaration silenced him. "I shall think over what you say," he added after a minute's wait. "I suppose I can't say more than that."

Their eyes met and she smiled a little.

"I don't believe I expected as much," she said. "I think I'll go now. You have been wonderfully patient." Again she smiled slightly, at the same time extending her hand. The gesture was quite friendly, but in Loder's eyes it held relief as well as friendliness, and when their hands met he noticed that her fingers barely brushed his.

He picked up her cloak and carried it across the room. As he held the door open he laid it quietly across her arm.

"I'll think over what you've said," he repeated.

Again she glanced at him as if suspecting sarcasm. Then, partly reassured, she paused. "You will always despise your opportunities, and I suppose I shall always envy them," she said. "That's the way with men and women. Good night." With another faint smile she passed out into the corridor.

Loder waited until he heard the outer door close, then he crossed the room thoughtfully and dropped into the chair she had vacated. He sat for a time looking at the hand her fingers had touched. Then he lifted his head with a characteristic movement.

"By Jove," he said aloud, "how cordially she detests him!"

## CHAPTER IX.

Loder slept soundly and dreamlessly in Chilcote's canopied bed. To him the big room, with its severe magnificence, suggested nothing of the gloom and solitude that it held in its owner's eyes. The ponderous furniture, the high ceiling, the heavy curtains, unchanged since the days of Chilcote's grandfather, all hinted at a far reaching ownership that stirred him. The ownership was mythical in his regard and the possessions a mirage, but they filled the day and surely sufficient for the day.

That was his frame of mind as he opened his eyes on the following morning and lay appreciative of his comfort, of the surrounding space, even of the light that filtered through the curtain chinks, suggestive of a world recreated. With day all things seemed possible to a healthy man. He stretched his arms luxuriously, delighting in the glossy smoothness of the sheets.

What was it Chilcote had said? Better live for a day than exist for a lifetime. That was true, and life had begun. At thirty-six he was to know it for the first time.

He smiled, but without irony. Man is at his best at thirty-six, he mused. He has retained his enthusiasms and shed his exuberances; he has learned what to pick up and what to pass by; he no longer imagines that to drain a cup one must taste the dregs. He closed his eyes and stretched again not his arms only, but his whole body. The pleasure of his mental state lasted on a physical expression. Then, sitting up in bed, he pressed the electric bell.

Chilcote's new valet responded. "Pull those curtains, Benwick," he said. "What's the time?" He had passed the ordeal of Benwick's eyes the night before.

The man was standing a little stupidly. He was looking at Loder's head—



"I'll think over what you've said," he repeated.  
ed head—"it seems to him that if you made one real effort now, even now, to

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the dressing table. "Eight o'clock, sir. I didn't expect the bell so early, sir."

Loder felt reproved, and a pause followed.

"May I bring your cup of tea, sir?"

"No, not just yet. I'll have a bath first."

Benwick showed ponderous uncertainty. "Warm, sir?" he hazarded.

"No, cold."

Still perplexed, the man left the room.

Loder smiled to himself. The chances of discovery in that quarter were not large. He was inclined to think that Chilcote had even overstepped necessity in the matter of his valet's dullness.

He breakfasted alone, following Chilcote's habit, and after breakfast found his way to the study.

As he entered Greening rose with the same conciliatory haste that he had shown the night before.

Loder nodded to him. "Early at work?" he said pleasantly.

The little man showed instant, almost ridiculous, relief. "Good morning, sir," he said. "You, too, are early. I rather feared your nerves troubled you after I left last night, for I found your letters still unopened this morning. But I am glad to see you look so well."

Loder promptly turned his back to the light. "Oh, last night's letters?" he said. "To tell you the truth, Greening, my wife"—his hesitation was very slight—"my wife looked me up after you left, and we gossiped. I clean forgot the post." He smiled in an explanatory way as he moved to the desk and picked up the letters.

With Greening's eyes upon him there was no time for scruples. With very creditable coolness he began opening the envelopes one by one. The letters were unimportant, and he passed them on after another to the secretary, exchanging a slight thrill of authority each left his hand. Again the fact never visible in little things showed in his mind.

"I use my engagement book," he said when the letters were opened.

Benwick's Greening handed him the book, and bound like Chilcote's eyes, in lizard skin.

Loder took it the gold monogram stamped at him in the bright

morning light. The incident moved his sense of humor. He and the book were co-operators in the fraud, it seemed. He felt an inclination to wink back. Nevertheless he opened it with proper gravity and skimmed the pages.

The page devoted to the day was almost full. On every other line were jottings in Chilcote's irregular hand, and twice among the entries appeared a prominent cross in blue penning. Loder's interest quickened as his eye caught the mark. It had been agreed between them that only engagements essential to Chilcote's public life need be carried through during his absence, and these to save his confusion were to be crossed in blue pencil. The rest, for the most part social claims, were to be left to circumstance and Loder's inclination. Chilcote's erratic memory always accounting for the breaking of trivial promises.

But Loder in his new energy was anxious for obligations. The desire for fresh and greater tests grew with indulgence. He scanned the two lines with eagerness. The first was an interview with Cressham, one of Chilcote's supporters in Wark; the other an engagement to lunch with Fraide. At the idea of the former his interest quickened, but at thought of the latter it quailed momentarily. Had the entry been a royal command it would have affected him infinitely less. For a space his assurance faltered. Then by coincidence the recollection of Eve and Eve's words of last night came back to him, and his mind was filled with a new sensation.

Because of Chilcote he was dejected by Chilcote's wife! There was no denying that in all the pleasant excitement of the adventure that knowledge had rankled. It came to him now linked with remembrance of the slight, reluctant touch of her fingers, the faintly evasive dislike underlying her glance. It was a trivial thing, but it touched his pride as a man. That was how he put it to himself. It wasn't that he valued this woman's opinion—any woman's opinion. It was merely that it touched his pride. He turned again to the window and gazed out, the engagement book still between his hands. What if he compelled her respect? What if by his own personality cloaked under Chilcote's identity he forced her to admit his capability? It was a

matter of pride, after all—scarcely even of pride; self respect was a better word.

Satisfied by his own reasoning, he turned back into the room.

"See to those letters, Greening," he said. "And for the rest of the morning's work you might go on with your Khorasan notes. I believe we'll want every inch of knowledge we can get in that quarter before we're much older. I'll see you again later." With a reassuring nod he crossed the room and passed through the door.

He lunched with Fraide at his club and afterward walked with him to Westminster. The walk and lunch were both memorable. In that hour he learned many things that had been sealed to him before. He tasted his first draft of real elation, his first drop of real discomfiture. He saw for the first time how a great man may descend—how unostentatiously, how fully, how delightfully. He felt that tact and kindness perfectly combined may accomplish, and he burned inwardly with a sense of duplicity that crushed and elated him alternately. He was John Loder, friendless, penniless, with no present and no future, yet he walked down Whitehall in the full light of day with one of the greatest statesmen England has known.

Some strangers were being shown over the terrace when he and Fraide reached the house, and, noticing the open door, the old man paused.

"I never refuse fresh air," he said. "Shall we take another breath of it before settling down?" He took Loder's arm and drew him forward. As they passed through the doorway the pressure of his fingers tightened. "I shall reckon today among my pleasantest memories, Chilcote," he said gravely. "I can't explain the feeling, but I seem to have touched Eve's husband, the real you, more closely this morning than I ever did before. It has been a genuine happiness." He looked up with the eyes that through all his years of action and responsibility had remained so bright.

But Loder paled suddenly, and his glance turned to the river—wide, mysterious, secret. Unconsciously Fraide had stripped the illusion. It was not John Loder who walked here; it was Chilcote—Chilcote with his position, his