

THE Masquerader

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

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THE necessary formalities of departure were speedily got through. The passing of the corridors, the gaining of the carriage, seemed to Loder to be marvellously simple proceedings. Then, as he sat by Eve's side and again felt the forward movement of the horses, he had leisure for the first time to wonder whether the time that had passed since last he occupied that position had actually been lived through.

Only that night he had unconsciously compared one incident in his life to a sketch in which the lights and shadows have been obliterated and lost. Now that picture rose before him, startlingly and incredibly intact. He saw the sunlit houses of Santasolare, backgrounded by the sunlit hills—saw them as plainly as when he himself had sketched them on his memory. Every detail of the scene remained the same, even to the central figure; only the eye and the hand of the artist had changed.

At this point Eve broke in upon his thoughts. Her first words were curiously coincidental.

"What did you think of Lillian Astrupp tonight?" she asked. "Wasn't her gown perfect?"

Loder lifted his head with an almost guilty start. Then he answered straight from his thoughts.

"I—I didn't notice it," he said, "but her eyes reminded me of a cat's eyes—and she walks like a cat. I never seemed to see it—until tonight."

Eve changed her position. "She was very artistic," she said tentatively. "Don't you think the gold gown was beautiful with her pale colored hair?"

Loder felt surprised. He was convinced that Eve disliked the other, and he was not sufficiently versed in women to understand her praise. "I thought"—he began. Then he wisely stopped. "I didn't see the gown," he substituted.

Eve looked out of the window. "How unappreciative men are!" she said. But her tone was strangely free from censure.

After this there was silence until Grosvenor square was reached. Having left the carriage and passed into the house, Eve paused for a moment at the foot of the stairs to give an order to Crapham, who was still in attendance in the hall, and again Loder had an opportunity of studying her. As he looked a sharp comparison rose to his mind.

"A fairy princess!" he had heard the red haired man say as Lillian Astrupp came into view along the Bramfells' corridor, and the simile had seemed particularly apt. With her grace, her delicacy, her subtle attraction, she might well be the outcome of imagination. But with Eve it was different. She also was graceful and attractive, but it was grace and attraction of a different order. One was beautiful with the beauty of the white rose that springs from the hothouse and withers at the first touch of cold; the other with the beauty of the wild rose on the cliffs above the sea, that keeps its petals fine and transparent in face of salt spray and wet mist. Eve, too, had her realm, but it was the realm of real things. A great confidence, a feeling that here one might rely even if all other faiths were shaken, touched him suddenly. For a moment he stood irresolute, watching her mount the stairs with her easy, assured step. Then a determination came to him. Fate favored him tonight; he was in luck tonight. He would put his fortune to one more test. He swung across the hall and ran up the stairs.

His face was keen with interest as he reached her side. The hard outline of his features and the hard grayness of his eyes were softened as when he had paused to talk with Lakeley. Action was the breath of his life, and his face changed under it as another's might change under the influence of stirring music or good wine.

Eve saw the look and again the uneasy expression of surprise crossed her eyes. She paused, her hand resting on the banister.

Loder looked at her directly. "Will you come into the study as you came that other night? There's something I want to say." He spoke quietly. He felt master of himself and her.

She hesitated, glanced at him and then glanced away.

"Will you come?" he said again. And as he said it his eyes rested on the sweep of her thick eyelashes, the curve of the back hair.

At last her lashes lifted and the perplexity and doubt in her blue eyes stirred him. Without waiting for her answer, he leaned forward.

"Say yes!" he urged. "I don't often ask for favors."

Still she hesitated. Then her decision was made for her. With a new boldness he touched her arm, drawing her forward gently but decisively toward Chilcote's rooms.

In the study a fire burned brightly, the desk was laden with papers, the lights were nicely adjusted, even the chairs were in their accustomed places. Loder's senses responded to each suggestion. It seemed but a day since he had seen it last. It was precisely as he had left it—the niche needing but the man.

To hide his emotion he crossed the floor quickly and drew a chair forward. In less than six hours he had run up and down the scale of emotions. He had looked despair in the face till the sudden sight of Chilcote had lifted him to the skies; since then surprise had assailed him in its strongest form; he had known the full meaning of the word "risk," and from every contingency he had come out conqueror. He bent over the chair as he pulled it forward to hide the expression in his eyes.

"Sit down," he said gently.

Eve moved toward him. She moved slowly, as if half afraid. Many emotions stirred her—distrust, uncertainty and a curious half dominant, half suppressed questioning that it was difficult to define. Loder remembered her shrinking coldness, her reluctant tolerance on the night of his first coming, and his individuality, his certainty of power, kindled afresh. Never had he been so vehemently himself; never had Chilcote seemed so complete a shadow.

As Eve seated herself he moved forward and leaned over the back of his chair. The impulse that had filled him in his interview with Renwick, that had goaded him as he drove to the reception, was dominant again.

"I tried to say something as we drove to the Bramfells' tonight," he began. Like many men who possess eloquence for an impersonal cause, he was brusque, even blunt, in the stating of his own case. "May I hark back, and go on from where I broke off?"

Eve half turned. Her face was still puzzled and questioning. "Of course." She sat forward again, clasping her hands.

He looked thoughtfully at the back of her head, at the slim outline of her shoulders, the glitter of the diamonds about her neck.

"Do you remember the day, three weeks ago, that we talked together in this room—the day a great many things seemed possible?"

This time she did not look round. She kept her gaze upon the fire.

"Do you remember?" he persisted quietly. In his college days men who heard that tone of quiet persistence had been wont to lose heart. Eve heard it now for the first time and, without being aware, answered to it.

"Yes, I remember," she said.

"On that day you believed in me." In his earnestness he no longer simulated Chilcote; he spoke with his own steady reliance. He saw Eve stir, unclasp and clasp her hands, but he went steadily on. "On that day you saw me in a new light. You acknowledged me." He emphasized the slightly peculiar word. "But since that day—his voice quickened—"since that day your feelings have changed, your faith in me has fallen away." He watched her closely, but she made no sign, save to lean still nearer to the fire. He crossed his arms over the back of her chair. "You were justified," he said suddenly. "I've not been—myself since that day." As he said the words his coolness forsook him slightly. He loathed the necessary lie, yet his egotism clamored for vindication. "All men have their lapses," he went on. "There are times—there are days and weeks when I—when my"—The word "nerves" touched his tongue, hung upon it, then died away unspoken.

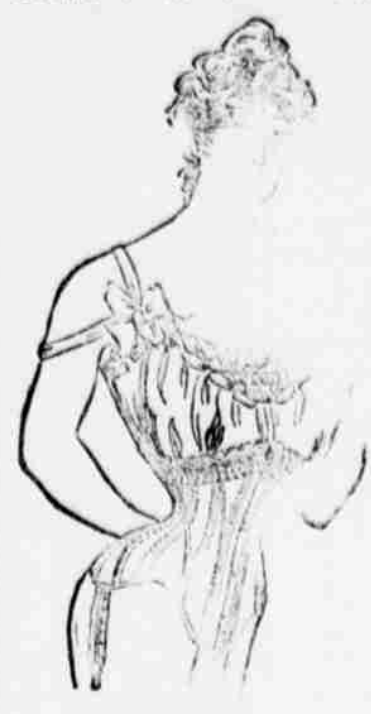
Very quietly, almost without a sound, Eve had risen and turned toward him. She was standing very straight, her face a little pale, the hand that rested on the arm of her chair trembling slightly.

"John," she said quickly, "don't say that word! Don't say that hideous word 'nerves'! I don't feel that I can bear it tonight—not just tonight. Can you understand?"

Loder stepped back. Without comprehending, he felt suddenly and strangely at a loss. Something in her face struck him silent and perplexed. It seemed that without preparation he had stepped upon dangerous ground. With an undefined apprehension, he waited, looking at her.

"I can't explain it," she went on with nervous haste, "I can't give any rea-

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sons, but quite suddenly the—the farce has grown unbearable. I used not to think—used not even to care—but suddenly things have changed—or I have changed." She paused, confused and distressed. "Why should it be? Why should things change?" She asked the question sharply, as if in appeal against her own incredulity.

Loder turned aside. He was afraid of the triumph, volcanic and irrepressible, that her admission roused.

"Why?" she said again.

He turned slowly back. "You forget that I'm not a magician," he said gently. "I hardly know what you are speaking of."

For a moment she was silent, but in that moment her eyes spoke. Pain, distress, pride, all strove for expression; then at last her lips parted.

"Do you say that in seriousness?" she asked.

It was no moment for fencing, and Loder knew it. "In seriousness," he replied shortly.

"Then I shall speak seriously too." Her voice shook slightly and the color came back into her face, but the hand in the arm of the chair ceased to tremble. "For more than four years I have known that you take drugs—for more than four years I have acquiesced in your deceptions, in your meannesses"—

There was an instant's silence. Then Loder stepped forward.

"You knew—for four years?" he said, very slowly. For the first time that night he remembered Chilcote and forgot himself.

Eve lifted her head with a quick gesture, as if, in clinging off discretion and silence, she appreciated to the full the new relief of speech.

"Yes, I knew. Perhaps I should have spoken when I first surprised the secret, but it's all so past that it's useless to speculate now. It was fate, I suppose. I was very young, you were very unapproachable, and—and we had no love to make the way easy." For a second her glance faltered and she looked away. "A woman's—a girl's—disillusioning is a very sad comedy—it should never have an audience." She laughed a little bitterly as she looked back again. "I saw all the deceptions, all the subtleties, all the—lies." She said the word deliberately, meeting his eyes.

Again he thought of Chilcote, but his face paled.

"I saw it all. I lived with it all till I grew hard and indifferent—till I acquiesced in your 'nerves' as readily as the rest of the world that hadn't suspected and didn't know." Again she laughed nervously. "And I thought the indifference would last forever. If one lives in a groove for years, one gets frozen up. I never felt more frozen than on the night Mr. Fraide spoke to me of you—asked me to use my influence; then, on that night!"

"Yes. On that night?" Loder's voice was tense.

But her excitement had suddenly fallen. Whether his glance had quelled it or whether the force of her feelings had worked itself out it was impossible to say, but her eyes had lost their resolution. She stood hesitating for a moment, then she turned and moved to the mantelpiece.

"That night you found me changed?" Loder was insistent.

"Changed—and yet not changed." She spoke reluctantly, with averted head.

"And what did you think?"

Again she was silent. Then again a faint excitement tinged her cheeks.

"I thought"—she began. "It seemed"—Once more she paused, hampered by her own uncertainty, her own sense of puzzling incongruity. "I don't know why I speak like this," she went on at last, as if in justification of herself, "or why I want to speak. But a feeling—an extraordinary, incomprehensible feeling seems to urge me on. The same feeling that came to me on the day we had tea together—the feeling that made me—that almost made me believe"—

"Believe what?" The words escaped him without volition.

At sound of his voice she turned. "Believe that a miracle happened," she said; "that you had found strength, had freed yourself."

"From morphia?"

"From morphia."

In the silence that followed Loder lived through a century of suggestion and indecision. His first feeling was for himself, but his first clear thought was for Chilcote and their compact. He stood, metaphorically, on a stone in the middle of a stream, balancing on one foot, then on the other; looking to the right bank, then to the left. At

last, as it always did, inspiration came to him slowly. He realized that by one plunge he might save both Chilcote and himself.

He crossed quickly to the fireplace and stood by Eve. "You were right in your belief," he said. "For all that time, from the night you spoke to me of Fraide to the day you had tea in this room, I never touched a drug."

She moved suddenly, and he saw her face. "John," she said unsteadily, "you—I—I have known you to lie to me about other things."

With a hasty movement he averted his head. The doubt, the appeal in her words, shocked him. The whole isolation of her life seemed summed up in the one short sentence. For the instant he forgot Chilcote. With a reaction of feeling he turned to her again.

"Look at me!" he said brusquely.

She raised her eyes.

"Do you believe I'm speaking the truth?"

She searched his eyes intently, the doubt and hesitancy still struggling in her face.

"But the last three weeks?" she said reluctantly. "How can you ask me to believe?"

He had expected this and he met it steadily enough. Nevertheless his courage faltered. To deceive this woman, even to justify himself, had in the last half hour become something sacrilegious.

"The last three weeks must be buried," he said hurriedly. "No man could free himself suddenly from—from a vice." He broke off abruptly. He hated Chilcote; he hated himself. Then Eve's face, raised in distressed appeal, overshadowed all scruples. "You have been silent and patient for years," he said suddenly. "Can you be patient and silent a little longer?" He spoke without consideration. He was conscious of no selfishness beneath his words. In the first exercise of conscious strength the primitive desire to reduce all elements to his own sovereignty submerged every other emotion. "I can't enter into the thing," he said; "like you, I give no explanations. I can only tell you that on the day we talked together in this room I was myself—in the full position."

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