

THE Masquerader

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Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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The message was interesting as well as imperative, and he made an instant response. The thought of Lakeley's keen eyes and shrewd enthusiasms always possessed strong attractions for his own slower temperament, but even had this impetus been lacking, the knowledge that at the St. George's offices, if anywhere, the true feelings of the party were invariably voiced would have drawn him without hesitation.

It was scarcely 12 o'clock when he turned the corner of the tall building, but already the keen spirit that Lakeley everywhere diffused was making itself felt. Loder smiled to himself as his eyes fell on the day's placards with their uncompromising headings and passed onward from the string of gayly painted carts drawn up to receive their first consignment of the paper to the troop of eager newsboys passing in and out of the big swing doors with their piled up bundles of the early edition, and with a renewed thrill of anticipation and energy he passed through the doorway and ran upstairs. Passing unchallenged through the long corridor that led to Lakeley's office, he caught a fresh impression of action and vitality from the click of the tape machines in the subeditor's office, and a glimpse through the open door of the subeditors themselves, each occupied with his particular task; then without time for further observation he found himself at Lakeley's door. Without waiting to knock, as he had felt compelled to do on the one or two previous occasions that business had brought him there, he immediately turned the handle and entered the room.

Editors' offices differ but little in general effect. Lakeley's surroundings were rather more elaborate than is usual, as became the dignity of the oldest Tory evening paper, but the atmosphere was unmistakable. As Loder entered he glanced up from the desk at which he was sitting, but instantly returned to his task of looking through and making a pile of early evening editions that were spread around him. His coat was off and hung on the chair behind him, and he pulled vigorously on a long cigar.

"Hello! That's right," he said laconically. "Make yourself comfortable half a second, while I skim the St. Stephen's."

His salutation pleased Loder. With a nod of acquiescence he crossed the office to the brisk fire that burned in the grate.

For a minute or two Lakeley worked steadily, occasionally breaking the quiet by an unintelligible remark or a vigorous stroke of his pencil. At last he dropped the paper with a gesture of satisfaction and leaned back in his chair.

"Well," he said, "what d'you think of this? How's this for a complication?"

Loder turned round. "I think," he said quietly, "that we can't overestimate it."

Lakeley laughed and took a long pull at his cigar. "And we mustn't be afraid to let the Sefborough crowd know it, eh?" He waved his hand to the poster of the first edition that hung before his desk.

Loder, following his glance, smiled.

Lakeley laughed again. "They might have known it all along if they'd cared to deduce," he said. "Did they really believe that Russia was going to sit calmly looking across the Heri-Rud while the shah played at mobilizing? But what became of you last night? We had a regular prophesying of the whole business at Bramfell's; the great Fraide looked in for five minutes. I went on with him to the club afterward and was there when the news came in. 'Twas a great night!"

Loder's face lighted up. "I can imagine it," he said, with an unusual touch of warmth.

Lakeley watched him intently for a moment. Then with a quick action he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk.

"It's going to be something more than imagination for you, Chilcote," he said impressively. "It's going to be solid earnest!" He spoke rapidly and with rather more than his usual shrewd decisiveness; then he paused to see the effect of his announcement.

Loder was still studying the flaring poster. At the other's words he turned sharply. Something in Lakeley's voice, something in his manner, arrested him. A tinge of color crossed his face.

"Reality?" he said. "What do you mean?"

For a further space his companion watched him, then with a rapid movement he tilted back his chair.

"Yes," he said. "Yes; old Fraide's instincts are never far out. He's quite right. You're the man!"

Still quietly, but with a strange underglow of excitement, Loder left the fire and, coming forward, took a chair at Lakeley's desk.

"Do you mind telling me what you're driving at?" he asked in his old, laconic voice.

Lakeley still scrutinized him with an air of brisk satisfaction; then with a gesture of finality he tossed his cigar away.

"My dear chap," he said, "there's going to be a breach somewhere—and Fraide says you're the man to step in and fill it! You see, five years ago, when things looked lively on the gulf and the Bundar Abbas business came to light, you did some promising work, and a reputation like that sticks to a man even when he turns slacker! I won't deny that you've slacked abominably," he added as Loder made an uneasy movement, "but slacking has different effects. Some men run to seed, others mature. I had almost put you down on the black list, but I've altered my mind in the last two months."

Again Loder stirred in his seat. A host of emotions were stirring in his mind. Every word wrung from Lakeley was another stimulus to pride, another subtle tribute to the curious force of personality.

"Well?" he said. "Well?"

Lakeley smiled. "We all know that Sefborough's ministry is—well, top-heavy," he said. "Sefborough is building his card house just a story too high. It's a toss up what'll upset the balance. It might be the army, of course, or it might be education, but it might quite as well be a matter of foreign policy!"

They looked at each other in comprehensive silence.

"You know as well as I that it's not the question of whether Russia comes into Persia, but the question of whether Russia goes out of Persia when these Hazaras are subdued! I'll lay you what you like, Chilcote, that within one week we hear that the risings are suppressed, but that Russia, instead of retiring, has advanced those tempting twenty miles and comfortably ensconced herself at Meshed—as she ensconced herself on the island of Ashurada." Lakeley's nervous, energetic figure was braced, his light blue eyes brightened by the intensity of his interest.

"If this news comes before the Easter recess," he went on, "the first nail can be hammered in on the motion for adjournment. And if the right man does it in the right way I'll lay my life 'twill be a nail in Sefborough's coffin."

Loder sat very still. Overwhelming possibilities had suddenly opened before him. In a moment the unreality of the past months had become real; a tangible justification of himself and his imposture was suddenly made possible. In the stress of understanding him, too, leaned forward, and, resting his elbows on the desk, took his face between his hands.

For a space Lakeley made no remark. To him man and man's moods came second in interest to his paper and his party politics. That Chilcote should be conscious of the glories he had opened up seemed only natural; that he should show that consciousness in a becoming gravity seemed only right. For some seconds he made no attempt to disturb him, but at last his own irrepressible activity made silence unendurable. He caught up his pencil and tapped impatiently on the desk.

"Chilcote," he said quickly and with a gleam of sudden anxiety, "you're not by any chance doubtful of yourself?"

At sound of his voice Loder lifted his face. It was quite pale again, but the energy and resolution that had come into it when Lakeley first spoke were still to be seen.

"No, Lakeley," he said very slowly. "It's not the sort of moment in which a man doubts himself."

CHAPTER XIX.

AND so it came to pass that Loder was freed from one responsibility to undertake another.

From the morning of March 27, when Lakeley had expounded the political programme in the offices of the St. George's Gazette, to the afternoon of April 1 he found himself a central figure in the whirlpool of activity that formed itself in Conservative circles.

With the acumen for which he was noted, Lakeley had touched the keystone of the situation on that morning, and succeeding events, each fraught with one that memorable 1st of April. It was obvious in the crowded benches on both sides of the house, in the oneness of purpose that insensibly made itself felt through the ranks of the opposition and found definite expression in Fraide's stiff figure and tightly shut lips, in the unmistakable uneasiness that lay upon the ministerial benches.

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But notwithstanding these indications of battle the early portion of the proceedings was unmarked by excitement, being tinged with the purposeless lack of vitality that had of late marked all affairs of the Sefborough ministry, and it was not until the adjournment of the house for the Easter recess had at last been moved that the spirit of activity hovering in the air descended and galvanized the assembly into life. It was then, amid a stir of interest, that Loder slowly rose.

Many curious incidents have marked the speechmaking annals of the house of commons, but it is doubtful whether it has ever been the lot of a member to hear his own voice raised for the first time on a subject of vital interest to his party, having been denied all initial assistance of minor questions asked or unimportant amendments made. Of all those gathered together in the great building on that day, only one man appreciated the difficulty of Loder's position, and that man was Loder himself.

He rose slowly and stood silent for a couple of seconds, his body braced, his fingers touching the sheaf of notes that lay in front of him. To the waiting house the silence was effective. It might mean overassurance or it might mean a failure of nerve at a critical moment. Either possibility had a tinge of piquancy. Moved by the same impulse, fifty pairs of eyes turned upon him with new interest, but up in the ladies' gallery Eve clasped her hands in sudden apprehension, and Fraide, sitting stiffly in his seat, turned and shot one swift glance at the man on whom, against prudence and precedent, he had pinned his faith. The glance was swift, but very searching, and with a characteristic movement of his wiry shoulders he resumed his position and his usual grave, attentive attitude. At the same moment Loder lifted his head and began to speak.

Here at the outset his inexperienced met him. His voice, pitched too low, only reached those directly near him. It was a moment of great strain. Eve, listening intently, drew a long breath of suspense and let her fingers drop apart. The skeptical, watchful eyes that faced him, line upon line, seemed to flash and brighten with critical interest. Only Fraide made no change of expression. He sat placid, serious, attentive, with the shadow of a smile be-

hind his eyes.

Again Loder paused, but this time the pause was shorter. The ordeal he had dreaded and waited for was passed, and he saw his way clearly. With the old movement of the shoulders he straightened himself and once more began to speak. This time his voice rang quietly true and commanding across the floor of the house.

No first step can be really great. It must of necessity possess more of prophecy than of achievement. Nevertheless it is by the first step that a man marks the value not only of his cause, but of himself. Following broadly on the lines that tradition has laid down for the Conservative orator, Loder disguised rather than displayed the vein of strong, persuasive eloquence that was his natural gift. The occasion that might possibly justify such a display of individuality might lie with the future, but it had no application to the present. For the moment his duty was to voice his party sentiments with as much lucidity, as much logic and as much calm conviction as lay within his capacity.

Standing quietly in Chilcote's place, he was conscious with a deep sense of



gravity of the peculiarity of his position, and perhaps it was this unconscious and unstudied seriousness that lent him the tone of weight and judgment so essential to the cause he had in hand. It has always been difficult to arouse the interest of the house on matters of British policy in Persia. Once aroused it may, it is true, reach fever heat with remarkable rapidity, but the introductory stages offer that worst danger to the earnest speaker—the dread of an apathetic audience. But from this consideration Loder, by his sharp consciousness of personal difficulties, was given immunity.

Pitching his voice in that quietly masterful tone that beyond all others compels attention, he took up his subject and dealt with it with dispassionate force. With great skill he touched its own importance had established the precision of his forecast.

Minutely watchful of Russia's attitude, Fraide quietly organized his forces and strengthened his position with a statesmanlike grasp of opportunity, and to Loder the attributes displayed by his leader during those trying days formed an endless and absorbing study. Setting the thought of Chilcote aside, ignoring his own position and the risks he daily ran, he had fully yielded to the glamour of the moment and in the first freedom of a loose rein he had given unreservedly all that he possessed of activity, capacity and determination to the cause that had claimed him.

Singularly privileged in a constant personal contact with Fraide, he learned many valuable lessons of tact and organization in those five vital days during which the tactics of a whole party hung upon one item of news from a country thousands of miles away. For should Russia subdue the insurgent Hazaras and, laden with the honors of the peacemaker, retire across the frontier, then the political arena would remain undisturbed; but should the all important movement predicted by Lakeley become an accepted fact before parliament rose for the Easter recess, then the first blow in the fight that would rage during the succeeding session must inevitably be struck. In the meantime it was Fraide's difficult

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