THE Masquerader

By KATHERINE CECIL THURSTON,
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[CONTINUED.]

"No, I didn't—that's the other point. I didn't see him in the rooms, and I haven't seen him since. Directly he was gone I left the tent—I pretended to be hungry and bored—but, though I went through every room, he was nowhere to be found. Once"—she hesitated and laughed again—"once I thought I had found him, but it was only you—you, as you stood in that doorway with your mouth and chin hidden by Leonard Kaine's head. Wasn't it a quaint mistake?"

There was an uncertain pause. Then Loder, feeling the need of speech, broke the silence suddenly. "Where do I come in?" he asked abruptly. "What am I wanted for?"

"To help to throw light on the mystery! I've seen Blanche's list of people, and there wasn't a man I couldn't place — no outsider ever squeezes through Blanche's door. I have questioned Bobby Blessington, but he can't remember who came to the tent last. And Bobby was supposed to have kept count!" She spoke in deep scorn, but almost immediately the scorn faded and she smiled again. "Now that I've explained, Jack," she added, "what do you suggest?"

Then for the first time Loder knew what his presence in the room really meant, and at best the knowledge was disconcerting. It is not every day that a man is called upon to unearth himself.

"Suggest?" he repeated blankly.

"Yes. I'd rather have your idea of the affair than anybody else's. You are so dear and sarcastic and keen that you can't help getting straight at the middle of a fact."

When Lillian wanted anything she could be very sweet. She suddenly dropped her half petulant tone; she suddenly ceased to be a spoiled child. With a perfectly graceful movement she drew quite close to Loder and slid gently to her knees.

This is an attitude that few women can safely assume. It requires all the attributes of youth, suppleness and a certain buoyant ease. But Lillian never acted without justification and as she leaned toward Loder, her face lifted, her slight figure and pale hair softened by the firelight, she made a picture that it would have been difficult to criticise.

But the person who should have appreciated it stared steadily beyond it to the fire. His mind was absorbed by one question—the question of how he might reasonably leave the house before discovery became assured.

Lillian, attentively watchful of him, saw the uneasy look, and her own face fell. But, as she looked, an inspiration came to her—a remembrance of many interviews with Chilcote smoothed and facilitated by the timely use of tobacco.

"Jack," she said softly, "before you say another word I insist on your lighting a cigarette." She leaned forward, resting against his knee.

At her words Loder's eyes left the fire. His attention was suddenly needed for a new and more imminent difficulty. "Thanks!" he said quickly. "I—I have no wish to smoke."

"It isn't a matter of what you wish, but of what I say." She smiled. She knew that Chilcote with a cigarette between his lips was infinitely more tractable than Chilcote sitting idle, and she had no intention of ignoring the knowledge.

But Loder caught at her words. "Before you ordered me to smoke," he said, "you told me to give you some advice. Your first command must have prior claim." He grasped unhesitatingly at the less risky theme.

She looked up at him. "You're always nicer when you smoke," she persisted caressingly. "Light a cigarette—and give me one."

Loder's mouth became set. "No," he said, "we'll stick to this advice business. It interests me."

"Yes—afterward."

"No; now. You want to find out why this Englishman from Italy was at your sister's party and why he disappeared?"

There are times when a malignant obstinacy seems to affect certain people. The only answer Lillian made was to pass her hand over Loder's waistcoat and, feeling his cigarette case, to draw it from the pocket.

He affected not to see it. "Do you think he recognized you in that tent?" he insisted desperately.

She held out the case. "Here are your cigarettes. You know we're always more social when we smoke."

In the short interval while she looked up into his face several ideas passed through Loder's mind. He thought of standing up suddenly and so regaining his advantage. He wondered quickly whether one hand could possibly suffice for the taking out and lighting of two cigarettes. Then all need for speculation was pushed suddenly aside.

Lillian, looking into his face, saw his fresh look of disturbance, and from long experience again changed her tactics. Laying the cigarette case on the couch, she put one hand on his shoulder, the other on his left arm. Hundreds of times this caressing touch had quieted Chilcote.

"Dear old boy!" she said soothingly, her hand moving slowly down his arm.

In a flash of understanding the consequences of this position came to him. Action was imperative, at whatever risk. With an abrupt gesture he rose.

The movement was awkward. He got to his feet precipitately. Lillian drew back, surprised and startled, catching involuntarily at his left hand to steady her position.

Her fingers grasped at, then held his. He made no effort to release them. With a dogged acknowledgment, he admitted himself worsted.

How long she stayed immovable, holding his hand, neither of them knew. The process of a woman's instinct is so subtle, so obscure, that it would be futile to apply it to the commonplace test of time. She kept her hold tenaciously, as though his fingers possessed some peculiar virtue. Then at last she spoke.

"Rings, Jack?" she said very slowly. And under the two short words a whole world of incredulity and surmise made itself felt.

Loder laughed.

At the sound she dropped his hand and rose from her knees. What her suspicions, what her instincts were she could not have clearly defined, but her action was unhesitating. Without a moment's uncertainty she turned to the fireplace, pressed the electric button and flooded the room with light.

There is no force so demoralizing as unexpected light. Loder took a step backward, his hand hanging unguarded by his side, and Lillian, stepping forward, caught it again before he could protest. Lifting it quickly, she looked scrutinizingly at the two rings.

All women jump to conclusions, and it is extraordinary how seldom they jump short. Seeing only what Lillian saw, knowing only what she knew, no man would have staked a definite opinion, but the other sex takes a different view. As she stood gazing at the rings her thoughts and her conclusions sped through her mind like arrows—all aimed and all tending toward one point. She remembered the day when she and Chilcote had talked of doubles, her skepticism and his vehement defense of the idea, his sudden interest in the book "Other Men's Shoes," and his anathema against life and its irksome round of duties. She remembered her own first convinced recognition of the eyes that had looked at her in the doorway of her sister's house, and, last of all, she remembered Chilcote's unaccountable avoidance of the same subject of likenesses when she had mentioned it yesterday driving through the park, and with it his unnecessarily curt repudiation of his former opinions. She reviewed each item, then she raised her head slowly and looked at Loder.

He was prepared for the glance and met it steadily. In the long moment that her eyes searched his face it was she and not he who changed color. She was the first to speak. "You were the man whose hands I saw in the tent," she said. She made the statement in her usual soft tones, but a slight tremor of excitement underran her voice. Poodles, Persian kittens, even crystal gazing balls, seemed very far away in face of this tangible, fabulous, present interest. "You are not Jack Chilcote," she said very slowly. "You are wearing his clothes and speaking in his voice, but you are not Jack Chilcote." Her tone quickened with a touch of excitement. "You needn't keep silent and look at me," she said. "I know quite well what I am saying, though I don't understand it, though I have no real proof"— She paused, momentarily disconcerted by her companion's silent and steady gaze, and in the pause a curious and unexpected thing occurred.

Loder laughed suddenly—a full, confident, reassured laugh. All the web that the past half hour had spun about him, all the intolerable sense of an impending crash, lifted suddenly. He saw his way clearly, and it was Lillian who had opened his eyes.

Still looking at her, he smiled—a smile of reliant determination, such as Chilcote had never worn in his life. And with a calm gesture he released his hand.

"The greatest charm of woman is her imagination," he said quietly. "Without it there would be no color in life; we would come into and drop out of it with the same uninteresting tone of drab reality." He paused and smiled again.

At his smile Lillian involuntarily drew back, the color deepening in her cheeks. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

He lifted his head. With each moment he felt more certain of himself. "Because that is my attitude," he said. "As a man I admire your imagination, but as a man I fail to follow your reasoning."

The words and the tone both stung her. "Do you realize the position?" she asked sharply. "Do you realize that, whatever your plans are, I can spoil them?"

Loder still met her eyes. "I realize nothing of the sort," he said.

"Then you admit that you are not Jack Chilcote?"

"I neither deny nor admit. My identity is obvious. I can get twenty men to swear to it at any moment that you like. The fact that I haven't worn rings till now will scarcely interest them."

"But you do admit—to me, that you are not Jack?"

"I deny nothing—and admit nothing. I still offer my congratulations."

"Upon what?"

"The same possession—your imagination."

Lillian stamped her foot. Then by a quick effort she conquered her temper. "Prove me to be wrong!" she said, with a fresh touch of excitement. "Take off your rings and let me see your hand."

With a deliberate gesture Loder put his hand behind his back. "I never gratify childish curiosity," he said, with another smile.

Again a flash of temper crossed her eyes. "Are you sure," she said, "that it's quite wise to talk like that?"

Loder laughed again. "Is that a threat?"

"Perhaps."

"Then it's an empty one."

"Why?"

Before replying he waited a moment, looking down at her.

"I conclude," he began quietly, "that your idea is to spread this wild, improbable story—to ask people to believe that John Chilcote, whom they see before them, is not John Chilcote, but somebody else. Now, you'll find that a harder task than you imagine. This is a skeptical world, and people are absurdly fond of their own eyesight. We are all journalists nowadays—we all want facts. The first thing you will be asked for is your proof. And what does your proof consist of? The circumstance that John Chilcote, who has always despised jewelry, has lately taken to wearing rings! Your own testimony, unattended by any witnesses, that with those rings off his finger bears a scar belonging to another man! No; on close examination I scarcely imagine that your case would hold." He stopped, fired by his own logic. The future might be Chilcote's, but the present was his, and this present, with its immeasurable possibilities, had been rescued from catastrophe. "No," he said again. "When you get your proof perhaps we'll have another talk, but till then"—

"Till then?" She looked up quickly, but almost at once her question died away.

The door had opened, and the servant who had admitted Loder stood in the opening.

"Dinner is served!" he announced in his deferential voice.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AND Loder dined with Lillian Astrupp. We live in an age when society expects, even exacts, much. He dined, not through bravado and not through cowardice, but because it seemed the obvious, the only thing to do. To him a scene of any description was distasteful. To Lillian it was unknown. In her world people loved or hated, were spiteful or foolish, were even quixotic or dishonorable, but they seldom made scenes. Loder tacitly saw and tacitly accepted this.

Possibly they ate extremely little during the course of the dinner and talked extraordinarily much on subjects that interested neither, but the main point at least was gained. They dined. The conventionalities were appeased. The silent, watchful servants who waited on them were given no food for comment. The fact that Loder left immediately after dinner, the fact that he paused on the doorstep after the hall door had closed behind him and drew a long, deep breath of relief, held only an individual significance and therefore did not count.

On reaching Chilcote's house he passed at once to the study and dismissed Greening for the night. But scarcely had he taken advantage of his solitude by settling into an armchair and lighting a cigar than Renwick, displaying an unusual amount of haste and importance, entered the room, carrying a letter.

Seeing Loder, he came forward at once. "Mr. Fraide's man brought this, sir," he explained. "He was most particular to give it into my hands, making sure 'twould reach you. He's waiting for an answer, sir."

Loder rose and took the letter, a quick thrill of speculation and interest springing across his mind. During his time of banishment he had followed the political situation with feverish attention, insupportably chafed by the desire to share in it, apprehensively chilled at the thought of Chilcote's possible behavior. He knew that in the comparatively short interval since parliament had risen no act of aggression had marked the Russian occupation of Meshed, but he also knew that Fraide and his followers looked askance at that great power's amiable attitude, and at sight of his leader's message his intuition stirred.

Turning to the nearest lamp, he tore the envelope open and scanned the letter anxiously. It was written in Fraide's own clear, somewhat old fashioned writing and opened with a kindly rebuke for his desertion of him since the day of his speech; then immediately and with characteristic clearness it opened up the subject nearest the writer's mind.

Very slowly and attentively Loder read the letter, and, with the extreme quiet that with him invariably covered emotion, he moved to the desk, wrote a note and handed it to the waiting servant. As the man turned toward the door he called him.

"Renwick," he said sharply, "when you've given that letter to Mr. Fraide's servant ask Mrs. Chilcote if she can spare me five minutes."

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