

THE Masquerader

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

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[CONTINUED.]

He rose early on the day that was to witness his great effort and dressed slowly. It was a splendid morning. The spirit of the spring seemed embodied in the air, in the pale blue sky. In the shafts of cool sunshine that danced from the mirror to the dressing table, from the dressing table to the pictures on the walls of Chilcote's vast room. Inconsequently with its dancing rose a memory of the distant past—a memory of long forgotten days when, as a child, he had been bidden to watch the same sun perform the same fantastic evolutions. The sight and the thought stirred him curiously with an unlooked-for sense of youth. He drew himself together with an added touch of decision as he passed out into the corridor, and as he walked downstairs he whistled a bar or two of an inspiring tune.

In the morning room Eve was already waiting. She looked up, colored and smiled as he entered. Her face looked very fresh and young, and she wore a gown of the same pale blue that she had worn on his first coming.

She looked up from an open letter as he came into the room, and the sun that fell through the window caught her in a shaft of light, intensifying her blue eyes, her blue gown and the bunch of violets fastened in her belt. To Loder, still under the influence of early memories, she seemed the embodiment of some youthful ideal—something lost, sought for and found again. Realization of his feeling for her almost came to him as he stood there looking at her. It hovered about him, it tipped him, as it were, with its wings; then it rose again and soared away. Men like him—men keen to grasp an opening where their careers are concerned and tenacious to hold it when once grasped—are frequently the last to look into their own hearts. He glanced at Eve, he acknowledged the stir of his feeling, but he made no attempt to define its cause. He could no more have given reason for his sensations than he could have told the precise date upon which, coming downstairs at 8 o'clock, he had first found her waiting breakfast for him. The time when all such incidents were to stand out, each to a nicety in its appointed place, had not yet arrived. For the moment his youth had returned to him; he possessed the knowledge of work done, the sense of present companionship in a world of agreeable things; above all, the steady, quiet conviction of his own capacity. All these things came to him in the moment of his entering the room, greeting Eve and passing to the breakfast table; then, while his eyes still rested contentedly on the pleasant array of china and silver, while his senses were still alive to the fresh, earthy scent of Eve's violets, the blow so long dreaded—so slow in coming—fell with accumulated force.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE letter through which the blow fell was not voluminous. It was written on cheap paper in a disguised hand, and the contents covered only half a page. Loder read it slowly, mentally articulating every word; then he laid it down, and as he did he caught Eve's eyes raised in concern. Again he saw something of his own feelings reflected in her face, and the shock braced him. He picked up the letter, tearing it into strips.

"I must go out," he said slowly. "I must go now—at once." His voice was hard.

Eve's surprised, concerned eyes still searched his. "Now—at once?" she repeated. "Now—without breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry." He rose from his seat and, carrying the slips of paper across the room, dropped them into the fire. He did it not so much from caution as from an imperative wish to do something, to move, if only across the room.

Eve's glance followed him. "Is it bad news?" she asked anxiously. It was unlike her to be insistent, but she was moved to the impulse by the peculiarity of the moment.

"No," he said shortly. "It's—business. This was written yesterday; I should have got it last night."

Her eyes widened. "But nobody does business at 8 in the morning!"—she began in astonishment, then she suddenly broke off.

Without apology or farewell Loder had left the fireplace and walked out of the room.

He passed through the hall hurriedly, picking up a hat as he went, and,



Loder stood shocked and spellbound by the sight.

reaching the pavement outside, he went straight forward until Grosvenor square was left behind, then he ran. At the risk of reputation, at the loss of dignity, he ran until he saw a cab. Hailing it, he sprang inside, and as the cabman whipped up and the horse responded to the call he realized for the first time the full significance of what had occurred.

Realization, like the need for action, came to him slowly, but when it came it was with terrible lucidity. He did not swear as he leaned back in his seat mechanically watching the stream of men on their way to business, the belated cars of green produce blocking the way between the Strand and Covent Garden. He had no use for oaths; his feelings lay deeper than mere words. But his mouth was sternly set and his eyes looked cold.

Outside the law courts he dismissed his cab and walked forward to Clifford's inn. As he passed through the familiar entrance a chill fell on him. In the clear, early light it seemed more than ever a place of dead hopes, dead enterprises, dead ambitions. In the onward march of life it had been forgotten. The very air had a breath of unfulfillment.

He crossed the court rapidly, but his mouth set itself afresh as he passed through the doorway of his own house and crossed the bare hall.

As he mounted the well known stairs he received his first indication of life in the appearance of a cat from the second floor rooms. At sight of him the animal came forward, rubbed demonstratively against his legs and with affectionate persistence followed him upstairs.

Outside his door he paused. On the ground stood the usual morning can of milk—evidence that Chilcote was not yet awake or that, like himself, he had no appetite for breakfast. He smiled ironically as the idea struck him, but it was a smile that stiffened rather than relaxed his lips. Then he drew out the duplicate key he always carried and, inserting it quietly, opened the door. A close, unpleasant smell greeted him as he entered the small passage that divided the bed and sitting rooms—a smell of whisky mingling with the odor of stale smoke. With a quick gesture he pushed open the bedroom door. Then on the threshold he paused, a look of contempt and repulsion passing over his face.

In his first glance he scarcely grasped the details of the scene, for the half drawn curtains kept the light dim, but as his eyes grew accustomed to the obscurity he gathered their significance.

The room had a sleepless, faded air—the room that under his own occupation had shown a rigid, almost monastic severity. The plain dressing table was littered with cigarette ends and marked with black and tawny patches where the tobacco had been left to burn itself out. On one corner of the table a carafe of water and a whisky decanter rested one against the other, as if for support, and at the other end an overturned tumbler lay in a pool of liquid. The whole effect was sickly and nauseating. His glance turned involuntarily to the bed and there halted.

On the hard, narrow mattress, from which the sheets and blankets had fallen in a disordered heap, lay Chilcote. He was fully dressed in a shabby tweed suit of Loder's; his collar was open, his lip and chin unshaven; one

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hand was limply grasping the pillow, while the other hung out over the side of the bed. His face, pale, almost earthy in hue, might have been a mask save for the slight convulsive spasms that crossed it from time to time and corresponded with the faint, shivering starts that passed at intervals over his whole body. To complete his repellent appearance, a lock of hair had fallen loose and lay black and damp across his forehead.

Loder stood for a space shocked and spellbound by the sight. Even in the ghastly disarray the likeness—the extraordinary, sinister likeness that had become the pivot upon which he himself revolved—struck him like a blow. The man who lay there was himself, bound to him by some subtle, inexplicable tie of similarity. As the idea touched him he turned aside and stepped quickly to the dressing table. There, with unnecessary energy, he flung back the curtains and threw the window wide. Then again he turned toward the bed. He had one dominant impulse, to waken Chilcote, to be free of the repulsive, inert presence that chilled him with so personal a horror. Leaning over the bed, he caught the shoulder nearest to him and shook it. It was not the moment for niceties, and his gesture was rough.

At his first touch Chilcote made no response—his brain, dulled by indulgence in his vice, had become a lagard in conveying sensations—but at last, as the pressure on his shoulder increased, his nervous system seemed suddenly to jar into consciousness. A long shudder shook him; he half lifted himself and then dropped back upon the pillow.

"Oh!" he exclaimed in a trembling breath. "Oh!" The sound seemed drawn from him by compulsion.

Its uncanny tone chilled Loder anew. "Wake up, man!" he said suddenly. "Wake up! It's I—Loder."

Again the other shuddered; then he turned quickly and nervously. "Loder?" he said doubtfully. "Loder?" Then his face changed. "Good God," he exclaimed, "what a relief!"

The words were so intense, so spontaneous and unexpected that Loder took a step back.

Chilcote laughed discordantly and lifted a shaky hand to protect his eyes from the light.

"It's—it's all right, Loder! It's all right! It's only that I—I had a beastly dream. But, for heaven's sake, shut that window!" He shivered involuntarily and pushed the lock of damp hair from his forehead with a weak touch of his old irritability.

In silence Loder moved back to the window and shut it. He was affected more than he would own even to himself by the obvious change in Chilcote. He had seen him moody, restless, nervously excited, but never before had he seen him entirely demoralized. With a dull feeling of impotence and disgust he stood by the closed window, looking unseeingly at the roofs of the opposite houses.

But Chilcote had followed his movements restlessly, and now as he watched him a flicker of excitement crossed his face. "God, Loder," he said again, "it was a relief to see you! I dreamed I was in hell—a horrible hell, worse than the one they preach about." He laughed to reassure himself, but his voice shook pitifully.

Loder, who had come to fight, stood silent and inert.

"It was horrible—beastly," Chilcote went on. "There was no fire and brimstone, but there was something worse. It was a great ironic scheme of punishment by which every man was chained to his own vice—by which the thing he had gone to pieces over, instead of being denied him, was made compulsory. You can't imagine it." He shivered nervously and his voice rose. "Fancy being satiated beyond the limit of satiety, being driven and dogged by the thing you had run after all your life!"

He paused excitedly, and in the pause Loder found resolution. He shut his ears to the panic in Chilcote's voice, he closed his consciousness to the sight of his shaken face. With a surge of determination he rallied his theories. After all, he had himself and his own interests to claim his thought. At the moment Chilcote was a wreck, with no desire toward rehabilitation, but there was no guarantee that in an hour or two he might not have regained control over himself and with it the inclination that had prompted his letter of the day before. No; he had himself to look to. The survival of the fittest was the true, the only principle. Chilcote had had intellect, education, opportu-

nity, and Chilcote had deliberately cast them aside. Fortifying himself in the knowledge, he turned from the window and moved slowly back to the bed.

"Look here," he began, "you wrote for me last night." His voice was hard. He had come to fight.

Chilcote glanced up quickly. His mouth was drawn and there was a new anxiety in his eyes. "Loder!" he exclaimed quickly. "Loder, come here! Come nearer!"

Reluctantly Loder obeyed. Stepping closer to the side of the bed, he bent down.

The other put up his hand and caught his arm. His fingers trembled and jerked. "I say, Loder," he said suddenly, "I—I've had such a beastly night—my nerves, you know!"

With a quick, involuntary disgust Loder drew back. "Don't you think we might shove that aside?" he asked.

But Chilcote's gaze had wandered from his face and strayed to the dressing table; there it moved feverishly from one object to another.

"Loder," he exclaimed, "do you see—can you see if there's a tube of tabloids on the mantelshelf or on the dressing table?" He lifted himself nervously on his elbow, and his eyes wandered uneasily about the room. "I—I had a beastly night; my nerves are horribly jarred, and I thought—I think"—He stopped.

With his increasing consciousness his nervous collapse became more marked. At the first moment of waking the relief of an unexpected presence had surmounted everything else, but now, as one by one his faculties stirred, his wretched condition became patent. With a new sense of perturbation Loder made his next attack.

"Chilcote," he began sternly.

But again Chilcote caught his arm, plucking at the coat sleeve. "Where is it?" he said. "Where is the tube of tabloids—the sedative? I'm—I'm obliged to take something when my nerves go wrong." In his weakness and nervous tremor he forgot that Loder was the sharer of his secret. Even in his extremity his fear of detection clung to him limply—the lies that had become second nature slipped from him

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