

THE MASQUERADER

BY KATHERINE CECIL THURSTON

This famous novel is printed in serial form by arrangement with Richard Walton Tully, in whose screen version, a current First National Attraction adapted from John Hunter Booths dramatization, Guy Bates Post is now appearing.

SECOND INSTALLMENT

Chapter II—Continued

"Not your political career, sir?"

There was a moment in which Chilcote hesitated, a moment in which the desire that had filled his mind for months rose to his lips and hung there; then the question of the iniquity in Blessington's face, chilled it and it fell back into silence.

"I didn't say that," he murmured. "You young men jump to conclusions, Blessington."

"Forgive me, sir—I never meant to imply retirement. Why, I'll show you, Vale, Cressingham, and the whole Warlock crowd would be about your ears like flies if such a thing were even possible—now more than ever, since these Persian rumors. By the way, is there anything real in this border business? The St. George's came out rather strong last night."

Chilcote had moved back to the table. His face was pale from his outburst, and his fingers toyed restlessly with the open newspaper.

"I haven't seen the St. George's," he said, hastily. "Lakely is always ready to shake the red rag where Russia is concerned; whether we are to enter the arena is another matter. But what about Craig, Bannister? I think you mentioned something of a contract."

"Oh, don't worry about that, sir," Blessington had caught the twinkle in the corners of Chilcote's mouth. "The sharpness of his voice. I can't say, Bannister, but if they have an answer by Thursday it will be true enough." He began to collect his papers, but Chilcote stopped him.

"Wait," he said, veering suddenly. "Will you see to it now. I'll find more myself when I've done something. I'll come with you to the study."

He walked hastily across the room; then, with his hand on the door, he paused.

"You go first, Blessington," he said. "I'll follow you in ten minutes. I must glance through the papers first."

Blessington looked uncertain. "You won't forget, sir?"

"Forget? Of course not."

Still, doubtfully, Blessington left the room and closed the door.

Once alone, Chilcote walked slowly back to the table, drew up his chair, and sat down with his eyes on the white cloth, the paper lying unheeded beside him.

Time passed. A servant came into the room to remove the breakfast. Chilcote moved slightly when necessary, but otherwise remained his attitude. The servant, having finished his task, replenished the fire and left the room. Chilcote still sat.

At last, feeling numb, he rose and crossed to the fireplace. The clock on the mantelpiece stared him in the face. He looked at it, started slightly, then drew out his watch. Watch and clock corresponded. Each marked twelve o'clock. With a nervous motion he leaned forward and pressed the electric bell long and hard.

Instantly a servant answered.

"Is Mr. Blessington in the study?" Chilcote asked.

"He was there, sir, five minutes back."

Chilcote looked relieved.

"All right! Tell him I have gone out—had to go to—something important. You understand?"

"Understand, sir."

But before the words had been properly spoken Chilcote had passed the man and walked into the hall.

CHAPTER III

LEAVING his house, Chilcote walked forward quickly and almost leisurely. With the swing of the outer air the recollection of last night's adventure came back upon him.

Since the hour of his waking it had hung about with vague persistence, but now in the clear light of day it seemed to stand out with a fuller peculiarity.

The thing was preposterous, nevertheless it was genuine. He was wearing the overcoat he had worn the night before, and, acting on impulse, he thrust his hand into the pocket and drew out the stranger's card.

"Mr. John Loder!" He read the name over as he walked along, and it mechanically repeated itself in his brain—falling into measure with his steps. Who was John Loder? What was he? This question tantalized him all his pace unconsciously increased. The thought that two men so abnormally alike could inhabit the same city and remain unknown to each other faced him as a problem; it tangled with his personal worries and aggravated them. There seemed to be almost a danger in such an extraordinary likeness. He began to regret his impetuosity in thrusting his card upon the man. Then, again, how he had let himself go on the subject of Lexington! How narrowly he had escaped compromise! He turned hot and cold at the recollection of what he had said and what he might have said. Then for the first time he paused in his walk and looked about him.

On leaving Grosvenor Square he had turned westward, moving rapidly till the Marble Arch was reached; here, still oblivious to his surroundings, he had crossed the roadway to the Edgware Road, passing along it to the labyrinth of shabby streets

that he behind Paddington. Now, as he glanced about him, he saw with some surprise how far he had come.

The damp remnants of the fog still hung about the house-tops in a filmy veil; there were no glimpses of green to break the monotony of the dull, quiet, dingy, neglected. But to Chilcote the shabbiness was restful, the subdued atmosphere a satisfaction. Among these sad houses, these passers-by, each filled with his own concerns, he experienced a sense of rest and relief. In the fashionable streets that bounded his own horizon, if a man paused in his walk to work out an idea he instantly drew a crowd of inquisitive or contemptuous eyes; here, if a man halted for half an hour it was nobody's business but his own.

Enjoying this thought, he wandered on for close upon an hour, moving from street to street to another with steps that were listless or rapid, as inclination prompted; then, still acting with vague persistence, he stopped in a by-way, and entered a small eating-house.

The place was crowded and dirty, the air hot and steaming with the smell of food. But Chilcote passed through the door and moved to one of the tables with no expression of disgust, and with far less future misanthropy than he used in his own house. By a curious mental habit he felt greater freedom, larger opportunities for deep surroundings such as these than in the broad boulevards and weighty responsibilities of his own life. Choosing a corner seat, he called for coffee and there, protected by shadow and wrapped in cigarette smoke, he sat almost motionless, his eyes fixed on the door, his hand slipped his notebook and was busily writing.

The imagination was pleased while it waited, but with him nothing was permanent. Of late the greater part of his sufferings had been comprised in the terrible loneliness of all his aims—the distance for and impossibility of sustained effort in any direction. He had hardly lighted a second cigarette when the old nervousness fell upon him; he stared nervously in his seat, and the cigarette was scarcely burned out when he rose, paid his small bill, and left the shop.

Outside on the pavement he halted, pulled out his watch, and saw that two hours stretched in front before any appointment claimed his attention. He hesitated, vaguely aware that he might go to—what? He might do to those two hours? In the last few minutes a distance for solitude had risen in his mind, giving the close street a loneliness that had escaped him before.

As he stood wavering a cab pulled slowly down the street. The sight of a well-dressed man caused the cabman, looking his whip, to pause. Chilcote, seeing, felt impelled to call out.

The cab suggested explanation. Chilcote's mind seemed suddenly and he called his hand. The vehicle stopped and he climbed in.

"Where, sir?" The cabman peered down through the roof.

Chilcote raised his head. "Oh, anywhere near Pall Mall," he said. Then, as the horse started forward, he put up his hand and shook the cabman. "Wait," he called. "I've changed my mind. Drive to Cadogan Gardens—No. 33."

The distance to Cadogan Gardens was covered quickly. Chilcote had hardly realized that his destination was reached when the cab pulled up. Jumping out, he paid the fare and walked quickly to the entrance of No. 33.

"Is Lady Astrup at home?" he asked, sharply, as the door opened and he stepped into the hall.

The servant drew back deferentially. "Her ladyship has just finished lunch, sir," he said.

For answer Chilcote stepped through the doorway and walked half-way across the hall.

"All right," he said. "But don't disturb her on my account. I'll wait in the white room till she has finished. And, without further notice of the servant, he began to mount the stairs.

In the room he had chosen to wait a pleasant smell of fire greeted the dull January afternoon, and softened the thick white curtains, the gilt furniture, and the Venetian vases filled with white roses. Moving straight forward, Chilcote looked at the grate and stretched his hands to the blaze; then, with his usual listlessness, he turned and passed to a couch that stood a yard or two away.

On the couch, tucked away between a novel and a crystal gazing-ball, was a white Persian kitten, fast asleep. Chilcote picked up the ball and held it between his eyes and the fire; then he laughed superciliously, tossed it back into its place, and caught the kitten's tail. The little animal stirred, stretched itself, and began to purr. At the same moment the door of the room opened.

Chilcote turned round. "I particularly said you were not to be disturbed," he began. "Have I excited displeasure?"

"Never displeasure," the girl replied. "I have a pavilion at her place in Wales, and gaze for all you like at night people." Again she smiled.

Chilcote smiled as well. "How is it done?" he asked, momentarily amused.

"Oh, the doing is quite delicious,"

THE CHARACTERS IN THE STORY

JOHN CHILCOTE, member of the House of Commons, is the first man to hurry from his place when parliament adjourns on a January night; that is marked by the blackest fog in years and the news of border risings against the Persian government which are branded by

LAKELY, editor of St. George's, as the index of a long-cherished Russian scheme, growing to a gradual maturity under the "drift" policy of the British government. Nervous and high strung, Chilcote refuses a cab and walks. In the dense fog he loses a stranger, who indulges in good-natured conversation. Then Chilcote strikes a match to light his cigarette. He is amazed to see that the other man is the exact counterpart of himself. They exchange cards, the stranger's revealing him to be

JOHN LODER. On the following morning Chilcote awakens depressed and irritable. He is very disagreeable with his man-servant, ALISOPP. Left alone for a few minutes, Chilcote obtains from a wardrobe a glass tube filled with tablets, and, mixing some whisky, he drops two of the tablets into the glass and drains the contents. His nervousness is apparently gone, but after breakfast his irritability returns with the arrival of his secretary,

BLESSINGTON, who annoys him with political matter. He tells Blessington that he feels like "chucking it all."



"Goodby," he said "take care of yourself." [Guy Bates Post as Chilcote and Marcia Manon as Lady Astrup.]

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"No," he said, doubtfully. "No, I suppose not."

"Of course not. There are like-nesses, but not freak likenesses like that."

Chilcote's head was bent as she spoke, but at the last words he lifted it.

"I forget! I don't know about that!" he said. "Not so very long ago I saw two men so much alike that I—"

Lilian smiled.

He colored quickly. "You doubt me?" he asked.

"My dear Jack!" Her voice was delicately reproachful.

"Then you think that my—my imagination has been playing me tricks?"

"My dear boy! Nothing of the kind. Come back to your place and tell me the whole tale." She smiled again, and patted the couch invitingly.

But Chilcote's balance had been upset. For the first time he saw Lilian as one of the watchful, suspicious crowd before which he was constantly on guard. Acting on the sensation, he moved suddenly towards the door.

"I have an appointment at the House," he said, quickly. "I'll look in another day when I'm better company. My nerves, you know." He came back to the couch and took her hand; then he touched her cheek for an instant with his fingers.

"Good-bye," he said. "Take care of yourself—and the kitten," he added, with forced gaiety, as he crossed the room.

That afternoon Chilcote's nervous condition reached its height. All day he had avoided the kitten, but no evasion can be eternal, and this he realized as he sat in his place on the Opposition benches during the half-hour of wintry twilight that preceded the turning on of the lights. He realized it in that half-hour, but the application of the knowledge followed later, when the time came for him to question the government on some point relating to a proposed additional dry-dock at Talkley, the naval base. Then for the first time he knew that the sufferings of the past months could have a visible as well as a hidden side—could disguise his daily routine as they had already demoralized his will and character.

The thing came upon him with extraordinary lack of preparation. He sat through the twilight with tolerable calm, his nervousness showing only in the occasional lifting of his hand to his collar and the frequent changing of his position; but when the lights were turned on, and he turned back in his seat with closed eyes, he became conscious of a curious impression—a disturbing idea that, though his closed lids he could see the faces on the opposite side of the House, see the rows of eyes, sleepy, interested, or vigilant. Never before had the sensation presented itself, but now set up, it ran through all his susceptibilities. By an absurd trick of fancy those varying eyes seemed to pierce through his lids, almost through his eyeballs.

The cold perspiration that was his daily horror broke out on his forehead; and at the same moment Fraide, his leader, turned, leaned over the back of his seat, and touched his knee.

Chilcote started and opened his eyes. "I believe I was dozing," he said, confusedly.

Fraide smiled his dry, kindly smile. "A fatal admission for a member of the Opposition," he said. "I was looking for you earlier in the day, Chilcote. There is something I told this Persian affair. I believe it to be a more first move on the Persian front. I wish trading people and it worth watching."

Chilcote shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "I believe in it. Lakely put it in the powder in the St. George's, but I'll only be a noise and a puff of smoke."

But Fraide did not smile. "What is the feeling down at Work?" he asked. "Has it awakened any interest?"

At Work? Oh, I—I don't quite know. I have been a little out of touch with Work in the last few weeks. A man has so many private affairs to look to—"

He was uneasy under his chief's scrutiny.

Fraide's lips parted as if to make reply, but with a certain dignified reserve he closed them again and turned away.

Chilcote leaned back in his place and nervously passed his hand over his forehead. His mind was possessed by one consideration—the consideration of himself. He glanced down at the crowded, lighted House to the big glass doors; he glanced about him at his colleagues, indifferent or interested; then surreptitiously his fingers strayed to his watch-pocket.

Suddenly he carried his watch to his face, and he looked at it with a look of memory he had not had at home. He knew this, however, he continued to stare, while the need of the drug rushed through him with a sense of physical relief.

Three nights after the great fog John Loder sat by his desk in the light of the green-shaded lamp. The remains of a very frugal supper stood on the centre table, and in the

"Hold your ground, Chilcote," he said. "Rayforth is drying up."

With a wave of relief Chilcote dropped back into his place. Whatever the confusion in his mind, it was evidently not obvious in his face.

Rayforth resumed his seat, there was the usual slight stir and pause, then Sallet, the member for Salchester, rose.

With Sallet's first words Chilcote's hand again sought his pocket, and again his eyes strayed towards the doors, but Fraide's erect head and stiff back just in front of him held him quiet. With an effort he pulled out his notes and smoothed them nervously; but though his gaze was fixed on the pages, not a line of Blessington's clear writing reached his mind. He glanced at the face of the Speaker, then at the faces on the Treasury Bench; then once more he leaned back in his seat.

The man beside him saw the movement. "Fucking the dry-dock?" he whispered, jestfully.

"No"—Chilcote turned to him suddenly—"but I feel beastly—have felt beastly for weeks."

The other looked at him more closely. "Anything wrong?" he asked. "It was a novel experience to be confided in by Chilcote."

"Oh, it's the grind—the infernal grind." As he said it, it seemed to him suddenly that his strength gave way. He forgot his companion, his position, everything except the urgent instinct that filled mind and body. Scarcely knowing what he did, he rose and leaned forward to whisper in Fraide's ear.

Fraide was seen to turn, his thin face interested and concerned, then he was seen to nod once or twice in acquiescence, and a moment later Chilcote stepped quietly out of his place.

One or two men spoke to him as he hurried from the House, but he shook them off almost unconvincingly, making for the nearest exit, halted a cab.

The drive to Grosvenor Square was a misery. Time after time he changed from one corner of the cab to the other, his acute internal pains prolonged by every delay and increased by every motion. At last, weak in all his limbs, he stepped from the vehicle at his own door.

Entering the house, he instantly mounted the stairs and passed to his own room. Opening the bedroom door, he peered in cautiously, then pushed the door wide. The light had been switched on, but the room was empty. With a nervous excitement scarcely to be kept in check, he entered, shut and locked the door, then moved to the wardrobe, and, opening it, drew the table of tablets from the shelf.

His hand shook violently under the tube to the table. The strain of the day, the anxiety of the past hours, with their final failure, had found sudden expression. Mixing a larger dose than any he had before allowed himself, he swallowed it hastily, and, walking across the room, threw himself, fully dressed, upon the bed.

CHAPTER IV.

TO those whose sphere lies in the west of London, Fleet Street is little more than a name, and Clifford's Inn a mere dead letter. Yet Clifford's Inn lies as safely stowed away in the shadow of the Law Courts as any grave under a country church wall; it is as green of grass, as grey of stone, as irremovable to the passing footstep.

Facing the red-brick grass-plot of the little court stood the house in which John Loder had his rooms. Taken at a first glance, the house had the deserted air of an office, inhabited only in the early hours; but, as night fell, lights would be seen to show out, first on one floor, then on another; faint, human beings unconsciously signalling each other. The rooms Loder inhabited were on the highest floor; and from their windows one might gaze philosophically on the tree-tops, forgetting the uneven pavement and the worn railing that bounded their round. In the landing outside the rooms his name appeared above his door, but the paint had been soiled by time, and the letters for the most part reduced to shadows; so that, taken in conjunction with the paint staircase and bare walls, the place had a cheerless look.

Inside, however, the effect was somewhat mitigated. The room on the right hand, as one entered the small passage that served as hall, was of fair size, though low-ceiled. The paint of the wall-papering, like the name above the outer door, had long ago been worn to a dirty and nondescript hue, and the floor was innocent of carpet; yet in the middle of the room stood a fine old Cromwell table, and on the plain dark bookshelves and along the mantelpiece were quaint, valuable, lumber-political and historical. Various objects as certain as the wall-paper and the bookshelves were a sign of a man with few hobbies and no pleasures—who existed because he was alive, and worked because he was.

Three nights after the great fog John Loder sat by his desk in the light of the green-shaded lamp. The remains of a very frugal supper stood on the centre table, and in the

grate a small and economical-looking fire was burning.

Having written for close on two hours, he pushed back his chair and stretched his cramped fingers; then he yawned, rose, and slowly walked across the room. Reaching the mantelpiece, he took a pipe from the pipe-rack and some tobacco from the jar that stood behind the books. His face looked tired and a little worn, as is common with men who have worked long at an uncongenial task. Shredding the tobacco between his hands, he slowly filled the pipe, then lit it from the fire with a spill of twisted paper.

Almost at the moment that he applied the light the sound of steps mounting the uncarpeted stairs outside caught his attention, and he raised his head to listen.

Presently the steps halted and he heard a muffled knock. The stranger was evidently uncertain of his whereabouts. Then the steps moved forward again and paused.

An expression of surprise crossed Loder's face, and he laid down his pipe. As the visitor knocked, he walked quietly across the room and opened the door.

"The passage outside was dark, and the new-come drew back before the light from the room."

"Mr. Loder?" he began, interrogatively. Then all at once he laughed in embarrassed apology. "Forgive me," he said. "The light rather dazzled me, I didn't realize who it was."

Loder recognized the voice as belonging to his acquaintance of the fog.

"Oh, it's you?" he said. "Won't you come in?" His voice was a little cold. This sudden resurrection left him surprised—and not quite pleasantly surprised. He walked back to the fireplace, followed by his guest.

"The guest seemed nervous and agitated. 'I must apologize for the hour of my visit,' he said. 'My—my time is not quite my own.'"

Loder waved his hand. "Whose time is his own?" he said.

Chilcote, encouraged by the remark, drew nearer to the fire. "Until this morning he had refrained from looking directly at his host; now, however, he raised his eyes, and, despite his preparation, he revealed unmistakably before the extraordinary resemblance. Seen here, by the light of the fire, he fully furnished and elegantly refurnished room. It was even more astonishing than it had been in the mystery of the fog."

"Forgive me," he said again. "It is physical—purely physical. I feel lowered over against my will."

Loder smiled. The slight contempt that Chilcote had first inspired rose again, and with it a second feeling less easily defined. The man seemed so unstable, so incapable, yet so grotesquely suggestive to himself.

"The likeness is rather overbearing," he said; "but not heavy enough to sink under. Come nearer the fire. What brought you here? Christ—there was a wooden armchair by the fireplace. He indicated it with a wave of the hand; then turned and took up his shuddering pipe."

Chilcote, watching him furtively, obeyed the gesture and sat down.

"It is extraordinary," he said, as it unrolled to disengage the subject. "It is quite extraordinary."

The other glanced round. "Let's drop it," he said. "It's so confoundedly obvious." Then his tone changed. "Won't you smoke?" he asked.

"Thanks," Chilcote began to fumble for his cigarettes.

But his host forestalled him. Taking a box from the mantelpiece, he held it out.

"My own extravaganza," he said; "travelling. 'My resources bind me to one; and I think I have made a wise selection. It is about the only one we haven't got for six times over.' He glanced sharply at the face, so absurdly his own, then, finishing a fresh spill, offered his guest a light."

Chilcote inhaled his cigarette and leaned forward. In the flare of the lamp his face looked set and anxious, but Loder saw that the lips did not twitch as they had done on the previous occasion that he had given him a light, and a look of comprehension crossed his eyes.

"What will you drink? Or, rather, will you have whiskey? I keep nothing else. Hospitality is one of the debased luxuries."