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 Booth's dramatization, Guy Bates Post is now appearing.

THIRD INSTALLMENT

Chapter IV—Continued

Loder turned aside. "You must not ask that," he said, shortly. "When a man has only one capacity, and the capacity has no outlet, he is apt to run to seed in a wrong direction. I cultivate weeds—at abominable labor and a very small reward." He stood with his back to the fire, facing his visitor; his attitude was a curious blending of pride, defiance, and despondency.

Chilcote leaned forward again. "Why speak of yourself like that? You are [illegible] of intelligence and education. [illegible] ake questioningly, anxiously.

"Intelligence and education?" Loder laughed shortly. "London is crowded with intelligence. And education? What is education? The court dress necessary to presentation, the wig and gown necessary to the barrister. But do the wig and gown necessarily mean letters? Or the court dress royal favor? Education is the necessary; it is influence but is essential. You should know that."

Chilcote moved restlessly in his seat. "You talk bitterly," he said.

The other looked up. "I think bitterly, which is worse. I am one of the unlucky beggars who, in the expectation of money, has been denied a profession—even a trade, to which to cling in time of shipwreck; and who, when disaster comes, drift out to sea. I warned you the other night to steer clear of me. I come under the head of Botsom!"

Chilcote's face lighted. "You came a cropper?" he asked.

"No. It was some one else who came the cropper—I only dealt in results."

"Big results?"

"A drop from a probable eighty thousand pounds to a certain eight hundred."

Chilcote glanced up. "How did you take it?" he asked.

"I? Oh, I was twenty-five then. I had a good many hopes and a lot of pride; but there is no place for either in a working world."

"But your people?"

"My last relation died with the fortune."

"Your friends?"

Loder laid down his pipe. "I told you I was twenty-five," he said, with the tinge of humor that sometimes crossed his manner. "Doesn't that explain things? I had never taken favors in prosperity; a change of fortune was not likely to alter my ways. As I have said, I was twenty-five." He smiled. "When I realized my position I sold all my belongings with the exception of a table and a few books—which I stored. I put on a walking suit and let my beard grow; then, with my entire capital in my pocket, I left England without saying good-bye to any one."

"For how long?"

"Oh, for six years. I wandered half over Europe and through a good part of Asia in the time."

"And then?"

"Then? Oh, I shaved off the beard and came back to London." He looked at Chilcote, partly contemptuous, partly amused at his curiosity.

But Chilcote sat staring in silence. The domination of the other's personality and the futility of his achievements baffled him.

Loder saw his bewilderment. "You wonder what the devil I came into the world for," he said. "I sometimes wonder the same myself."

At his words a change passed over Chilcote. He half rose, then dropped back into his seat.

"You have no friends?" he said. "Your life is worth nothing to you?"

Loder raised his head. "I thought I had conveyed that impression."

"You are absolutely free man."

"No man is free who works for his bread. If things had been different I might have been in such shoes as yours, sauntering in legislative byways; my hopes turned that way once. But hopes, like more substantial things, belong to the past—" He stopped abruptly and looked at his companion.

The change in Chilcote had become more acute; he sat fingering his cigarette, his brows drawn down, his lips set nervously in a conflict of emotions. For a space he stayed very still, avoiding Loder's eyes; then, as if decision had suddenly come to him, he turned and met his gaze.

"How if there was a future," he said, "as well as a past?"

CHAPTER V.

FOR the space of a minute there was silence in the room, then outside in the still night three clocks simultaneously chimed eleven, and their announcement was taken up and echoed by half a dozen others, loud and faint, hoarse and resonant; for all through the hours of darkness the neighborhood of First Street is alive with chimes.

Chilcote, startled by the jangle, rose from his seat; then, as if driven by an uncontrollable impulse, he spoke again.

"You probably think I am mad—" he began.

Loder took his pipe out of his mouth. "Im not so presumptuous," he said, quietly.

For a space the other eyed him silently, as if trying to gauge his thoughts; then once more he broke into speech.

"Look here," he said. "I came tonight to make a proposition. When I have made it you'll first of all feel it is as I jeered when I made it to myself; then you'll see its possibilities—as I did; then"—he paused and glanced around the room nervously—"then you'll accept it—as I did." In the uneasy haste of his speech his words broke off almost unintelligibly.

Involuntarily Loder lifted his head to retort, but Chilcote put up his hand. His face was set with the desperate determination that weak men sometimes exhibit.

"Before I begin I want to say that I am not drunk—that I am neither mad nor drunk." He looked fully at his companion with his restless glance. "I am quite sane—quite reasonable."

Again Loder essayed to speak, but again he put up his hand.

"No. Hear me out. You need me—something of your story. I'll tell you something of mine. Tough as the best person, man or woman that I have confided in for ten years. You say you have been treated shabbily. I have treated myself shabbily—which is harder to reconcile. I had every chance—and I chucked every chance away."

There was a strained pause; then again Loder lifted his head.

"Morphia?" he said very quietly.

Chilcote wheeled round with a scared gesture. "How did you know that?" he asked sharply.

The other smiled. "It wasn't guessing—it wasn't even deduction. You told me, or as good as told me, in the fog—which we talked of Lectures. You were picturing that night, and I—. Well, perhaps one gets over-observant from living alone." He smoked again.

Chilcote subsided into his former seat and passed his handkerchief across his forehead.

Loder watched him for a space; then he spoke. "Why don't you pull up?" he said. "You did a year and still. Why don't you drop the thing before it gets too late?" His tone was unsympathetic, and below the question in his voice lay a note of hardness.

Chilcote returned his glance. The suggestion of recent had accentuated his pallor. Under his excitement he looked ill and worn.

"You might talk till doomsday, but every word would be wasted," he said, irritably. "I'm past praying for by something like six years—"

"Then why come here?" Loder was pulling hard on his pipe. "I'm not a dealer in sympathy."

"I don't require sympathy." Chilcote rose again. He was still agitated, but the agitation was quieter. "I want a much more expensive thing than sympathy—and I am willing to pay for it."

The other turned and looked at him. "I have no possession in the world that would be worth a fiver to you," he said, coldly. "You're either under a delusion or you're wasting my time."

Chilcote laughed nervously. "Wait," he said. "Wait. I only ask you to wait. First let me sketch you my position—it won't take many words."

"My grandfather was a Chilcote of Westmoreland; he was one of the first of his day and his class to recognize that there was a future in trade, so, breaking his own little twig from the family tree, he went south to Work and entered a ship-owning firm. In thirty years' time he died, the owner of one of the biggest trades in England, having married the daughter of his chief. My father was twenty-four and still at Oxford when he inherited. Almost his first act was to reverse my grandfather's early money by going north and placing together the family friendship. He married his first cousin; and then, with the Chilcote prestige restored and the subsequent money to back it, he entered on his ambition, which was to represent East Work in the Conservative interest. It was a big fight, but he won—as much by personal influence as by any other. He was an aristocrat, but he was a keen business man as well. The combination carries weight with your lower classes. He never did much in the House, but he was a power in his party in Work. They still use his name there to conjure with."

Loder leaned forward interestedly.

"Robert Chilcote?" he said. "I have heard of him. One of those tiny, unfortunately figures—strong in action, a little narrow in outlook, perhaps, but essential to a country's staying power. You have every reason to be proud of your father."

Chilcote resumed suddenly, "How easily we sum up when a matter is impersonal! My father may have been a fine figure, but he shouldn't have left me to climb to his pedestal."

Loder's eyes questioned. In his mostly unawakened interest he had let his pipe go out.

"Don't you grasp my meaning?" Chilcote went on. "My father died and I was elected for East Work. You may say that if I had go and disinterest for the position I could have kicked. But I tell you I couldn't. Every fiber, interest, political and commercial, bound me to the candidate being a Chilcote. I did what eight men out of ten would have done. I yielded to pressure."

"It was a fine opening!" The words escaped Loder.

"Most prisons have wide gates." Chilcote laughed acute unpleasantly. "That was six years ago. I had started on the morphia tack four years earlier, but up to my father's death I had it under my thumb—or believed I had; and in the realization of my new responsibilities and the excitement of the political fight I almost put it aside. For several months after I entered Parliament I worked. I believe I made one speech that marked me as a coming man." He laughed derisively. "I even married—"

"Married?"

"Yes. A girl of nineteen—the ward of a great statesman. It was a brilliant marriage—politically as well as socially. But it didn't work. I was born without the capacity for love. First the social life palled on me; then my work grew irksome. There was only one factor to make life endurable — morphia. Before six months were out I had fully admitted that."

"But your wife?"

"Oh, my wife knew nothing—knows nothing. It is the political business, the beastly routine of the political life, that is wearing me out." He stopped nervously, then hurried on again. "I tell you it's hell to see the same faces, to sit in the same seat day in, day out, knowing all the time that you must hold yourself in hand—must keep your grip on the reins—"

"It is always possible to apply for the Chiltern Hundreds."

"To retire? Possible to retire?" Chilcote broke into a loud, sarcastic laugh. "You don't know what the local pressure of a place like Work stands for. Twenty times I have been within an ace of chucking the whole thing. Once last year I wrote privately to Vale, one of our big men there, and hinted that my health was bad. Two hours after he had read my letter he was in my study. Had I been in Greenland the result would have been the same. No. Resignation is a breathless word to a man like me."

Loder looked down. "I see," he said, slowly. "I see."

"Then you see everything—the difficulty, the isolation of the position. Five years ago—three—even two years ago—I was able to endure it. Now it gets more unbearable with every month. The day is bound to come when—when"—he paused, hesitating nervously—"when it will be physically impossible for me to be at my post."

Loder remained silent.

"Physically impossible," Chilcote repeated, excitedly. "Until lately I was able to calculate—to count upon myself to some extent; but yesterday I received a shock—yesterday I discovered that—that"—again he hesitated painfully—"that I have passed the stage when one may calculate."

The situation was growing more embarrassing. To hide its awkwardness, Loder moved back to the grate and rebuilt the fire, which had fallen low.

Chilcote, still excited by his unusual vehemence, followed him, taking up a position by the mantel-piece.

"Well?" he said, looking down.

Very slowly Loder rose from his task. "Well?" he reiterated.

"Have you nothing to say?"

"Nothing, except that your story is unique, and that I suppose I am flattered by your confidence." His voice was intentionally brusque.

Chilcote paid no attention to the voice. Taking a step forward, he laid his fingers on the lapel of Loder's coat.

"I have passed the stage where I can count upon myself," he said, "and I want to count upon somebody else. I want to keep my place in the world's eyes and yet be free—"

Loder drew back involuntarily, consciousness struggling with bewilderment in his expression.

Chilcote lifted his head. "By an extraordinary chance," he said, "you are so like me what no other man in creation could do. It was suggested to me unconsciously by the story of a book—a book in which men change identities. I saw nothing in it at the time, but this morning, as I lay in bed, sick with yesterday's fiasco, it came back to me—it rushed over my mind in an inspiration. It will save me—and make you. I'm not insulting you, though you may think so."

Without remark Loder freed himself from the other's touch and walked back to his desk. His anger, his pride, and, against his will, his excitement were all aroused.

He sat down, leaned his elbow on the desk and took his face between his hands. The man behind him undoubtedly talked madness; but after five years of dreary sanity madness had a fascination. Against all reason it stirred and roused him. For one instant his pride and his anger faltered before it, then consciousness flowed back again and adjusted the balance.

"You propose," he said slowly, "that for a consideration of money I should trade on the likeness between us—and become your dummy, when you are otherwise engaged?"

Chilcote relaxed. "You are useless and blind," he said.

"Have I have caught your meaning?"

"In the rough, yes."

Loder nodded curtly. "Then take my advice and go home," he said. "You're fuddled."

The other returned his glance, and as their eyes met Loder was reluctantly compelled to admit that, though his face was disturbed, it had no traces of insanity.

"I make you a proposal," Chilcote repeated, nervously but with distinctness. "Do you accept?"

For an instant Loder was at a loss to find a reply sufficiently final. Chilcote broke in upon the pause.

"After all," he urged, "what I ask of you is a simple thing. Merely to carry through my routine duties for a week or two occasionally when I find my endurance giving way—when a respite becomes essential. The work would be nothing to a man in your state of mind, the pay anything you like to name." In his eagerness he had followed Loder to the desk. "Won't you give me an answer? I told you I am neither mad nor drunk."

Loder pushed back the scattered papers that lay under his arm.

"Only a lunatic would propose such a scheme," he said, brusquely and without feeling.

"Why?"

The other's lips parted for a quick retort; then in a surprising way the retort seemed to fail him. "Oh, because the thing isn't feasible, isn't practicable from any point of view."

Chilcote stepped closer. "Why?" he insisted.

"Because it couldn't work, man! Couldn't hold for a dozen hours."

Chilcote put out his hand and touched his arm. "But why?" he urged. "Why? Give me one unanswerable reason."

Loder shook off the hand and laughed, but below his laugh lay a suggestion of the other's excitement. Again the scene stirred him against his sounder judgment; though his reply, when it came, was firm enough.

"As for reasons—" he said. "There are a hundred, if I had time to name them. Take it, for the sake of supposition, that I were to accept your offer. I should take my place in your house at—let us say at dinner-time. Your man gets me into your evening-clothes, and there, at the very start, you have the first suspicion set up. He has probably known you for years—known you until every turn of your appearance, voice, and manner is far more familiar to him than it is to you. There are no eyes like a servant's."

"I have thought of that. My servant and my secretary can both be changed. I will do the thing thoroughly."

Loder glanced at him in surprise. The madness had more method than he had believed. Then, as he still looked, a fresh idea struck him, and he laughed.

"You have entirely forgotten one thing," he said. "You can hardly dismiss your wife."

"My wife doesn't count."

Again Loder laughed. "I'm afraid I scarcely agree. The complications would be slightly—slightly—" He paused.

Chilcote's latent irritability broke out suddenly. "Look here," he said, "this isn't a trifling matter. It may be moonshine to you, but it's reality to me."

Again Loder took his face between his hands.

"Don't ridicule the idea. I'm in dead earnest."

Loder said nothing.

"Think—think it over before you refuse."

For a moment Loder remained motionless; then he rose suddenly, pushing back his chair.

"Tush, man! You don't know what you say. The fact of your being married bars it. Can't you see that?"

Again Chilcote caught his arm.

"You misunderstand," he said. "You mistake the position. I tell you my wife and I are nothing to each other. She goes her way; I go mine. We have our own friends, our own rooms. Marriage, actual marriage, doesn't enter the question. We meet occasionally at meals, and at other people's houses; sometimes we go out together for the sake of appearances; beyond that, nothing. If you take up my life, nobody in it will trouble you less than Eve—I can promise that." He laughed unsteadily.

Loder's face remained unmoved.

"Even granting that," he said, "the thing is still impossible."

"Why?"

"There is the house. The position there would be untenable. A man is known there as he is known in his own club." He drew away from Chilcote's touch.

"Very possibly. Very possibly." Chilcote laughed quickly and excitedly. "But what club is without its eccentric member? I am glad you spoke of that. I am glad you raised that point. It was a long time ago that I hit upon a reputation for moods as a shield for—for other things, and the more useful it has become, the more I have let it grow. I tell you you might go down to the House tomorrow and spend the whole day without speaking to, even nodding to, a single man, and as long as you were I to outward appearances no one would raise an eyebrow. In the same way you might vote in my place, ask a question, make a speech if you wanted to—"

At the word speech Loder turned involuntarily. For a fleeting second the coldness of his manner dropped and his face changed.

Chilcote, with his nervous quickness of perception, saw the alteration, and a new look crossed his own face.

"Why not," he said quickly. "You once had ambitions in that direction. Why not renew the ambitions?"

"And drop back from the mountains into the gutter?" Loder smiled and slowly shook his head.

"Better to live for one day than to exist for a hundred!" Chilcote's voice trembled with anxiety. For the third time he extended his hand and touched the other.

This time Loder did not shake off the detaining hand; he scarcely seemed to feel its pressure.

"Look here." Chilcote's fingers tightened. "A little while ago you talked of influence. Here you can step into a position built by influence. You might do all you once hoped to do—"

Loder suddenly lifted his head. "Absurd!" he said. "Absurd! Such a scheme was never carried through."

"Precisely why it will succeed. People never suspect until they have a precedent. Will you consider it? At least consider it. Remember, if there is a risk, it is I who am running it. On your own showing you have no position to jeopardize."

The other laughed curtly.

"Before I go to-night will you promise me to consider it?"

"No."

"Then you will send me your decision by wire tomorrow. I won't take your answer now."

Loder freed his arm abruptly. "Why not?" he asked.

Chilcote smiled nervously. "Because I know men—and men's temptations. We are all very strong till the quick is touched; then we all whine. It's morphia with one man, ambition with another. In such case it's only a matter of sooner or later." He laughed in his satirical, unstrung way, and held out his hand. "You have my address," he said. "Au revoir."

Loder pressed the hand and dropped it. "Good-bye," he said mechanically. Then he crossed the room quietly and held the door open. "Good-bye," he said again as the other passed him.

As he crossed the threshold, Chilcote paused. "Au revoir," he corrected, with emphasis.

Until the last echo of his visitor's steps had died away Loder stood with his hand on the door; then, closing it quietly, he turned and locked round the room. For a considerable space he stood there as if weighing the merits of each object; then very slowly he moved to one of the bookshelves, drew out Mays Parliamentary Practice, and, carrying it to the desk, readjusted the lamp.

CHAPTER VI

ALL the next day Chilcote's moved in a fervor of excitement. He with some one moment, cold with fever the next, he rushed with reckless energy into every task that presented itself—only to drop it as speedily. Twice during the morning he drove to the entrance of Cliff-of-Ion, but each time his courage failed him and he returned to Grosvenor Square—to learn that the expected message from Loder had not come.

It was a wearing condition of mind; but at worst it was scarcely more than an exaggeration of what his state had been for months, and made but little obvious difference in his bearing or manner.

In the afternoon he took his place in the House, but though it was his first appearance since his failure of two days ago, he drew but small personal notice. When he chose, his manner could repel advances with extreme effect, and of late men had been prone to draw away from him.

In one of the lobbies he encountered Fraide surrounded by a group of friends. With his usual furtive haste he would have passed on; but, moving away from his party, the old man accosted him. He was always courteously particular in his treatment of Chilcote, as the husband of his ward and godchild.

"Better, Chilcote?" he said, holding out his hand.

At the sound of the low, rather formal tones, so characteristic of the old statesman, a hundred memories rose to Chilcote's mind, a hundred hours, distasteful in the living and unbearable in the recollection; and with them the new flush of hope, the new possibility of freedom. In a sudden rush of confidence he turned to his leader.

"I believe I've found a remedy for my nerves," he said. "I—I believe I'm going to be a new man." He laughed with a touch of excitement.

Fraide pressed his fingers kindly. "That is right," he said. "That is right. I called at Grosvenor Square this morning, but Eve told me your illness of the other day was not serious. She was very busy this morning—she could only spare me a quarter of an hour. She is indefatigable over the social side of your prospects, Chilcote. You owe her a large debt. A peculiar wife means a great deal to a politician."

The steady eyes of his companion disturbed Chilcote.

He drew away his hand.

"Eve is unique," he said, vaguely.

Fraide smiled. "That is right," he said, again. "Admiration is too largely excluded from modern marriages." And with a courteous excuse he rejoined his friends.

It was dinner-time before Chilcote could escape the House, but the moment departure was possible he hurried to Grosvenor Square.

As he entered the house, the hall was empty. He swore irritably under his breath and pressed the porcelain bell. Since his momentary exhilaration in Fraide's presence, his spirits had steadily fallen, until now they hung at the lowest ebb.

As he waited in unprecedented impatience for an answer to his summons, he caught sight of his own Antoinette at the head of the stairs.

"[illegible]" he called, [illegible] and some [illegible] his irritation. "Did you wait for me?"

"No, sir. I fancied you [illegible] home."

"Inquire again."

"Yes, sir." [illegible] the bell [illegible] Chilcote [illegible]

Chilcote started. At sudden sounds like all sensitive [illegible] of late. He half moved to the door, then stopped himself with a short exclamation. At the same instant Allsopp reappeared.

Chilcote turned on him excitedly.

"What the devil's the meaning of this?" he said. "A minority of servants in the house and nobody to open the hall door?"

Allsopp looked embarrassed. "Chilcote is coming directly, sir. He only left the hall to ask Jeffries—"

Chilcote turned. "Confound Cropplington!" he exclaimed. "Go and open the door yourself."

Allsopp vanished. His dignity struggling with his obedience. As he walked the bell sounded again.

"Did you hear me?" Chilcote said.

"Yes, sir." Allsopp crossed the hall.

As the door was opened Chilcote passed his handkerchief from one hand to the other in the tension of [illegible] as the sound of his own voice in the shrill tones of a [illegible] reached his ears, he let the [illegible] drop to the ground.

Allsopp took the yellow envelope and [illegible] to the master.

"[illegible]," he said. "And the boy's [illegible] to know if there is an answer." Picking up Chilcote's handkerchief, he turned aside with extreme alacrity.

Chilcote's hands were so unsteady that he could scarcely insert his finger under the flap of the envelope. Tearing off a corner, he wrenched the contents apart and smoothed out the flimsy pink paper.

The message was very simple, consisting of but seven words:

"Shall expect you at eleven to-night.—Loder."

He read it two or three times, then he looked up. "No answer," he said, mechanically, and to his own ears the rather he his voice sounded harsh and unnatural.

Exactly as the clocks chimed eleven Chilcote mounted the stairs to Loder's rooms. But this time there was more of haste than of uncertainty in his steps, and, reaching the landing, he crossed it in a couple of strides and knocked feverishly on the door.

It opened at once, and Loder stood before him.

The occasion was peculiar. For a moment neither spoke; each involuntarily looked at the other with new eyes and under changed conditions. Each had assumed a fresh standpoint in the other's thought. The passing astonishment, the half-impersonal curiosity that had previously tinged their relationship, was cast aside, never to be resumed. [illegible] the other saw himself—and [illegible] more.

To be continued.

As the visitor entered, Loder walked quietly across the room and opened the door. [Guy Bates Post portraying the dual role of John Chilcote and John Loder.]

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 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 jostles a stranger. They indulge in good natured conversation. 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 awakes depressed and irritable. He is very disagreeable with his man-servant,

ALLSOPP. Left alone for a few minutes Chilcote mixes some whisky and soda, into which he drops two tablets, and drains the contents. When Allsopp returns Chilcote's nervousness is apparently gone. After breakfast his irritability returns with the arrival of his secretary,

BLESSINGTON, who annoys him with political matters, and Chilcote leaves the house, wandering aimlessly. He finally takes a cab to the home of

LADY ASTRUPP. They chat familiarly and sentimentally. Chilcote complains of his nerves, recalls an appointment at the House and leaves. He usually carried his morphia tablets with him, but, feeling in his pockets, finds that he has forgotten them. Realizing that he has become a hopeless slave to drug, he calls upon Loder to submit a proposition. "What is your work?" he asks.

"You probably think I am mad," he began.