THE MASQUERADER

BY KATHERINE CECIL THURSTON

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SIXTH INSTALLMENT

Chapter X—Continued

Then would come the inevitable recall; then in earnest he might venture to put his hand to the plough. He never indulged in day-dreams, but something in the nature of a vision had flashed over his mind in that instant. He had seen himself standing in that same building, seen the rows of faces first bored, then hesitatingly transformed under his personal domination; under the one great power he knew himself to possess—the power of eloquence. The strength of the suggestion had been almost painful. Men who have attained self-repression are occasionally open to a perilous onrush of feeling. Believing that they know themselves, they walk boldly forward towards the highroad and the pitfall alike.

These had been Loder's disconnected ideas and speculations on the first day of his new life. At four o'clock on the ninth day he was pacing with quiet confidence up and down Chilcote's study, his mind pleasantly busy and his cigar comfortably alight, when he paused in his walk and frowned, interrupted by the entrance of a servant.

The man came softly into the room, drew a small table towards the fire, and proceeded to lay an extremely fine and unserviceable looking cloth.

Loder watched him in silence. He had grown to find silence a very useful commodity. To wait and let things develop was the attitude he oftenest assumed. But on this occasion he was perplexed. He had not rung for tea, and in any case a cup on a saucer satisfied his wants. He looked critically at the fragile cloth.

Presently the servant departed, and solemnly re-entered carrying a silver tray, with cups, a teapot, and cakes. Having adjusted them to his satisfaction, he turned to Loder.

"Mrs. Chilcote will be with you in five minutes, sir," he said.

He waited for some response, but Loder gave none. Again he had found the advantages of silence, but this time it was silence of a compulsory kind. He had nothing to say.

The man, finding him irresponsive, retired; and, left to himself, Loder stared at the array of feminine trifles; then, turning abruptly, he moved to the centre of the room.

Since the day they had talked on the Terrace, he had only seen Eve thrice, and always in the presence of others. Since the night of his first coming, she had not invaded his domain, and he wondered what this new departure might mean.

His thoughts of her had been less vivid in the last few days; for, though still using steady discretion, he had been drawn gradually nearer the fascinating whirlpool of new interests and new work. Shut his eyes as he might, there was no denying that this moment, so personally vital to him, was politically vital to the whole country; and that by a curious coincidence Chilcote's position well-nigh forced him to take an active interest in the situation. Again and again the suggestion had arisen that—should the smouldering fire in Persia break into a flame, Chilcote's commercial interests would facilitate, would practically compel, his standing in the campaign against the government.

The little incident of the teacable, recalling the social side of his obligations, had aroused the realization of greater things. As he stood meditatively in the middle of the room he saw suddenly how absorbed he had become in these greater things. How, in the swing of congenial interests, he had been borne insensibly forward—his capacities expanding, his intelligence asserting itself. He had so undeniably found his sphere that the idea of inspiration had receded gently as by natural laws, until his own personality had begun to color the day's work.

As this knowledge came, he wondered quickly if it held a solution of the present little comedy; if Eve had seen what others, he knew, had observed—that Chilcote was showing a grasp of things that he had not exhibited for years. Then, as a sound of skirts came softly down the corridor, he squared his shoulders with his habitual abrupt gesture and threw his cigar into the fire.

Eve entered the room much as she had done on her former visit, but with one difference. In passing Loder she quietly held out her hand.

He took it as quietly. "Why am I so honored?" he said.

She laughed a little and looked across at the fire. "How like a man! You always want to begin with reasons. Let's have tea first and explanations after." She moved forward towards the table, and he followed. As he did so, it struck him that her dress seemed in peculiar harmony with the day and the room, though beyond that he could not follow its details. As she paused beside the table he drew forward a chair with a faint touch of awkwardness.

She thanked him and sat down.

He watched her in silence as she poured out the tea, and the thought crossed his mind that it was incredibly long since he had seen a woman preside over a meal. The deftness of her fingers filled him with an unfamiliar, half-inquisitive wonder. So interesting was the sensation that, when she held his cup towards him, he didn't immediately see it.

"Don't you want any?" She smiled a little.

He started, embarrassed by his own tardiness. "I'm afraid I'm dull," he said. "I've been so—"

"So keen a worker in the last week?"

For a moment he felt relieved. Then, as a fresh silence fell, his sense of awkwardness returned. He sipped his tea and ate a biscuit. He found himself wishing, for almost the first time, for some of the small society talk that came so pleasantly to other men. He felt that the position was ridiculous. He glanced at Eve's averted head, and laid his empty cup upon the table.

Almost at once she turned, and their eyes met.

"John," she said, "do you guess at all why I wanted to have tea with you?"

He looked down at her. "No," he said, honestly and without embellishment.

The curtness of the answer might have displeased another woman. Eve seemed to take no offence.

"I had a talk with the Fraides to-day," she said. "A long talk. Mr. Fraide said great things of you—things I wouldn't have believed from anybody but Mr. Fraide." She altered her position and looked from Loder's face back into the fire.

He took a step forward. "What things?" he said. He was almost ashamed of the sudden, inordinate satisfaction that welled up at her words.

"Oh, I mustn't tell you!" She laughed a little. "But you have surprised him." She paused, sipped her tea, then looked up again with a change of expression.

"John," she said, more seriously, "there is one point that sticks a little. Will this great change last?" Her voice was direct and even—wonderfully direct for a woman, Loder thought. It came to him with a certain force that beneath her remarkable charm might possibly be a remarkable character. It was not a possibility that had occurred to him before, and it caused him to look at her a second time. In the new light he saw her beauty differently, and it interested him differently. Heretofore he had been inclined to class women under three heads—loves, amusements, or encumbrances; now it crossed his mind that a woman might possibly fill another place—the place of a companion.

"You are very skeptical," he said, still looking down at her.

She did not return his glance. "I think I have been made skeptical," she said.

As she spoke the image of Chilcote shot through his mind. Chilcote, irritable, vicious, unstable, and, a quick compassion for this woman so inevitably shackled to him followed it.

Eve, unconscious of what was passing in his mind, went on with her subject.

"When we were married," she said gently, "I had such a great interest in things, such a great belief in life. I had lived in politics, and I was marrying one of the coming men—everybody said you were one of the coming men—I scarcely felt there was anything left to ask for. You didn't make very ardent love," she smiled, "but I think I had forgotten about love. I wanted nothing so much as to be like Lady Sarah—married to a great man." She paused, then went on more briefly: "For a while things went right; then slowly things went wrong. You got your—your nerves."

Loder changed his position with something of abruptness.

She misconstrued the action.

"Please don't think I want to be disagreeable," she said, hastily. "I don't. I'm only trying to make you understand why—why I lost heart."

"I think I know," Loder's voice broke in involuntarily. "Things got worse—then still worse. You found interference useless. At last you ceased to have a husband."

"Until a week ago". She glanced up quickly. Absorbed in her own feelings, she had seen nothing extraordinary in his words.

But at hers, Loder changed color. "It's the most incredible thing in the world," she said. "It's quite incredible, and yet I can't deny it. Against all my reason, all my experience, all my inclination I seem to feel in the last week something of what I felt at first." She stopped with an embarrassed laugh. "It seems that, as if by magic, life has been picked up where I dropped it six years ago." Again she stopped and laughed.

Loder was keenly uncomfortable, but he could think of nothing to say.

"It seemed to begin that night I dined with the Fraides," she went on. "Mr. Fraide talked so wisely and so kindly about many things. He recalled all we had hoped for in you; and—and he blamed me a little." She paused and laid her cup aside. "He said that when people have made what they call their last effort, they should always make just one effort more. He promised that if I could once persuade you to take an interest in your work, he would do the rest. He said all that, and a thousand other kinder things—and I sat and listened. But all the time I thought of nothing but their use fulness. Before I left I promised to do my best—but my thought was still the same. It was stronger than ever when I forced myself to come up here—" She paused again, and glanced at Loder's averted head. "But I came, and then—as if by some moving magic I had completed a piece of work, you seemed—you somehow seemed different. It sounds ridiculous, I know." Her voice was half amused, half deprecating. "It wasn't a difference in your face, though I knew directly that you were free from—nerves." Again she hesitated over the word. "It was a difference in yourself, in the things you said, more than in the way you said them." Once more she paused and laughed a little.

Loder's discomfort grew.

"But it didn't affect me then." She spoke more slowly. "I wouldn't admit it then. And the next day when we talked on the Terrace I still refused to admit it—though I felt it more strongly than before. But I have watched you since that day, and I know there is a change. Mr. Fraide feels the same, and he is never mistaken. I know it's only nine or ten days, but I've hardly seen you in the same mood for nine or ten hours in the last three years." She stopped, and the silence was expressive. It seemed to plead for confirmation of her instinct.

Still Loder could find no response.

After waiting for a moment, she leaned forward in her chair and looked up at him.

"John," she said, "is it going to last? That's what I came to ask. I don't want to believe till I'm sure; I don't want to risk a new disappointment." Loder felt the earnestness of her eyes, though he avoided meeting it.

"I couldn't have said this to you a week ago, but today I can. I don't pretend to explain why—the feeling is too inexplicable. I only know that I can say it now, and that I couldn't a week ago. Will you understand—and answer?"

Still Loder remained mute. His position was horribly incongruous. What could he say? What dared he say?

Confused by his silence, Eve rose.

"If it's only a phase, don't try to hide it," she said. "But if it's going to last—if by any possibility it's going to last—" She hesitated and looked up.

She was quite close to him. He would have been less than man had he been unconscious of the subtle contact of her glance, the nearness of her presence—and no one had ever hinted that manhood was lacking in him. It was a moment of temptation. His own energy, his own aspirations, seemed as clear as crystal. Chilcote [illegible] his life, his ambitions, were his own. He raised his eyes and looked at her.

"You want me to tell you that it will go on?" he said.

Her eyes brightened; she took a step forward. "Yes!" she said. "I want it more than anything in the world!"

There was a wait. The silence that seemed utterly lifelessness, yet his lips but he delayed it. The pause was fateful. While he hesitated the door opened and the footman who had brought in the tea reappeared.

He crossed the room and handed Loder a telegram. "Any answer, sir?" he said.

Eve moved back to her chair. There was a flush on her cheeks and her eyes were still alertly bright.

Loder tore the telegram open, read it, then threw it into the fire.

"No answer!" he said, laconically.

At the brusqueness of his voice, Eve looked up. "Disagreeable news?" she said, as the servant departed.

He didn't look at her. He was watching the telegram withering in the centre of the fire.

"No," he said at last, in a strained voice. "No. Only news that I—that I had forgotten to expect."

CHAPTER XI.

THERE was a silence—an uneasy break—after Loder spoke. The episode of the telegram was, to all appearances, ordinary enough, calling forth Eve's question and his own reply as a natural sequence; yet in the pause that followed it each was conscious of a bar, each was aware that in some subtle way the thread of sympathy had been dropped, though in one the cause was inexplicable and to the other only too plain.

Loder watched the ghost of his message grow whiter and thinner, then dissolve into airy fragments and flutter up the chimney. As the last moment, wavered out of sight, he turned and looked at his companion.

"You almost made me commit myself," he said. In the desire to hide his feelings his tone was short.

Eve returned his glance with a quiet regard, but he scarcely saw it. He had a stupefied sense of disaster, a feeling of bitter self-condemnation that for the moment outweighed all other considerations. Almost at the moment of justification the good of life had crumbled in his fingers, the soil given beneath his feet, and with an absence of logic, a lack of justice unusual in him, he let resentment against Chilcote sweep suddenly over his mind.

Eve, still watching him, saw the darkening of his expression, and with a quiet movement rose from her chair.

"Lady Sarah has a theatre party tonight, and I am dining with her," she said. "It is an early dinner, so I must think about dressing. I'm sorry you think I tried to drive you into anything. I must have exercised myself badly." She laughed a little, to cover the slight discomfiture that her tone betrayed, and as she laughed she moved across the room towards the door.

Loder, engrossed in the check to his own schemes, incensed at the suddenness of Chilcote's recall, and still more incensed at his own folly in not having anticipated it, was oblivious for the moment of both her movement and her words. Then, quite abruptly, they obtruded themselves upon him, breaking through his egotism with something of the sharpness of pain following a blow. Turning quickly from the fireplace, he faced the shadowy room across which she had passed, but simultaneously with his turning she gained the door.

The knowledge that she was gone struck him with a sense of double loss. "Wait!" he called, suddenly moving forward. But almost at once he paused, chilled by the solitude of the room.

"Eve!" he said, using her name unconsciously for the first time.

But the corridor, as well as the room, was empty; he was too late. He stood irresolute; then he laughed shortly, turned, and passed back towards the fireplace.

The blow had fallen, the inevitable come to pass, and nothing remained but to take the fact with as good a grace as possible. Chilcote's telegram had summoned him to Clifford's Inn at seven o'clock, and it was now well on towards six. He pulled out his watch—Chilcote's watch he realized, with a touch of grim humor as he stooped to examine the dial by the light of the fire; then, as if the humor had verged to another feeling, he stood straight again and felt for the electric button in the wall. His fingers touched it, and simultaneously the room was lighted.

The abrupt alteration from shadow to light came almost as a shock. The feminine arrangement of the tea-table seemed incongruous beside the sober books and the desk laden with papers—incongruous as his own presence in the place. The thought was unpleasant, and he turned aside as if to avoid it; but at the movement his eyes fell on Chilcote's cigarette-box with its gleaming monogram, and the whimsical suggestion of his first morning rose again. The idea that the inanimate objects in the room knew him for what he was—recognized the interloper where human eyes saw the rightful possessor—returned to his mind. Through all his disgust and chagrin a smile forced itself to his lips, and, crossing the room for the second time, he passed into Chilcote's bedroom.

There the massive furniture and sombre atmosphere fitted better with his mood than the energy and action which the study always suggested. Walking directly to the great bed, he sat on its side and for several minutes stared straight in front of him, apparently seeing nothing; then at last the apathy passed from him, as his previous anger against Chilcote had passed. He stood up slowly, drawing his long limbs together, and recrossed the room, passing along the corridor and through the door communicating with the rest of the house. Five minutes later he was in the open air and walking steadily eastward, his hat drawn forward and his overcoat buttoned up.

As he traversed the streets he allowed himself no thought. Once, as he waited in Trafalgar Square to find a passage between the vehicles, the remembrance of Chilcote's voice coming out of the fog on their first night made itself prominent, but he rejected it quickly, guarding himself from even an involuntary glance at the place of their meeting. The Strand, with its unceasing life, came to him as something almost unfamiliar. Since his identification with the new life no business had drawn him east of Charing Cross, and his first sight of the narrower stream of traffic struck him as garish and unpleasant. As the impression came he accelerated his steps, moved by the wish to make regret and retrospection alike impossible by a contact with actual forces.

Still walking hastily, he entered Clifford's Inn, but there almost unconsciously his feet halted. There was something in the quiet immutability of the place that sobered energy, both mental and physical. A sense of changelessness—the changelessness of inanimate things, that rises in such solemn contrast to the variableness of mere human nature, which a new environment, a new outlook, sometimes even a new pressure, has power to rebuke and remold. He paused; then with slower and steadier steps crossed the little court and mounted the familiar stairs of his own house.

As he turned the handle of his own door some one stirred inside the sitting-room. Still under the influence of the stones and trees that he had just left, he moved directly towards the sound, and, without waiting for permission, entered the room. After the darkness of the passage it seemed well alight for, besides the lamp with its green shade, a large fire burned in the grate and helped to dispel the shadows.

As he entered the room Chilcote rose and came forward, his figure thrown into strong relief by the double light. He was dressed in a shabby tweed suit; his face looked pale and set with a slightly nervous tension, but besides the look and a certain added restlessness of glance there was no visible change. Reaching Loder, he held out his hand.

"Well?" he said, quickly.

The other looked at him questioningly.

"Well? Well? How has it gone?"

"The scheme? Oh, excellently!" Loder's manner was abrupt. Turning from the restless curiosity in Chilcote's eyes, he moved a little way across the room and began to draw off his coat. Then, as if struck by the incivility of the action, he looked back again. "The scheme has gone extraordinarily," he said. "I could almost say absurdly. There are some things, Chilcote, that fairly bowl a man over."

A great relief tinged Chilcote's face. "Good!" he exclaimed. "Tell me all about it."

But Loder was reticent. The moment was not propitious. It was as if a hungry man had dreamed a great banquet and had awakened to his starvation. He was chary of imparting his visions.

"There's nothing to tell," he said, shortly. "All that you'll want to know is here in black and white. I don't think you'll find I have slipped anything; it's a clear business record." From an inner pocket he drew out a bulky notebook, and, recrossing the room, laid it open on the table. It was a correct, even a minute, record, of every action that had been accomplished in Chilcote's name. "I don't think you'll find any loose ends," he said, as he turned back the pages. "I had you and your position in my mind all through." He paused and glanced up from the book. "You have a position that absolutely insists upon attention," he added, in a different voice.

At the new tone Chilcote looked up as well. "No moral lectures?" he said, with a nervous laugh. "I was anxious to know if you had pulled it off—and you have reassured me. That's enough. I was in a funk this afternoon to know how things were going—one of those sudden, unreasonable funks. But now that I see you"—he cut himself short and laughed once more—"now that I see you, I'm hanged if I don't want to—to prolong your engagement."

Loder glanced at him, then glanced away. He felt a quick shame at the eagerness that rose at the words—a surprised contempt at his own readiness to anticipate the man's weakness. But almost as speedily as he had turned away he looked back again.

"Tush, man!" he said, with his old, intolerant manner. "You're dreaming. You've had your holiday and school's begun again. You must remember you are dining with the Charringtons tonight. Young Charrington's coming of age—quite a big business. Come along! I want my clothes!" He laughed, and, moving closer to Chilcote, slapped him on the shoulder.

Chilcote started; then, suddenly becoming imbued with the other's manner, he echoed the laugh.

"By Jove!" he said, "you're right! You're quite right! A man must keep his feet in their own groove." Raising his hand, he began to fumble with his tie.

But Loder kept the same position. "You'll find the check-book in its usual drawer," he said. "I've made one entry of a hundred pounds—pay for the first week. The rest can stand over until—" He paused abruptly.

Chilcote shifted his position. "Don't talk about that. It upsets me to anticipate. I can make out a check tomorrow payable to John Loder."

"No. That can wait. The name of Loder is better out of the book. We can't be too careful." Loder spoke with unusual impetuosity. Already a slight, unreasonable jealousy was coloring his thoughts. Already he grudged the idea of Chilcote with his unstable glance and restless fingers opening the drawers and sorting the papers that for one stupendous fortnight had been his without question. Turning aside, he changed the subject brusquely.

"Come into the bedroom," he said. "It's half-past seven if it's a minute, and the Charringtons' show is at nine." Without waiting for a reply, he walked across the room and held the door open.

There was no silence while they exchanged clothes. Loder talked continuously, sometimes in short, curt sentences, sometimes with ironic touches of humor; he talked until Chilcote, strangely affected by contact with another personality after his weeks of solitude, fell under his influence—his excitement rising, his imagination stirring at the novelty of [illegible]. At last, garbed once more in the clothes of his own world, he passed from the bedroom back into the sitting-room, and there halted, waiting for his companion.

Almost directly Loder followed. He came into the room quietly, and, moving at once to the table, picked up the notebook.

"I'm not going to preach," he began, "so you needn't shut me up. But I'll say just one thing—a thing that will get said. Try and keep your hold! Remember your responsibilities—and keep your hold." He spoke energetically, looking earnestly into Chilcote's eyes. He did not realize it, but he was pleading for his own career.

Chilcote paled a little, as he always did in face of a reality. Then he extended his hand.

"My dear fellow," he said, with a touch of hauteur, "a man can generally be trusted to look after his own life."

Extricating his hand almost immediately, he turned towards the door and without a word of farewell passed into the little hall, leaving Loder alone in the sitting-room.

CHAPTER XII.

ON the night of Chilcote's return to his own Loder tasted the lees of life poignantly for the first time. Before their curious compact had been entered upon he had been, if not content, at least apathetic; but with action the apathy had been dispersed, never again to regain its old position.

He realized with bitter certainty that his was no real home-coming. On entering Chilcote's house he had experienced none of the unfamiliarity, none of the unsettled, awkwardness, that assailed him now. There he had almost seemed the exile returning after many hardships; here, in the atmosphere made common by years, he felt an alien. It was illustrative of the man's character that sentimentalities found no place in his nature. Sentiments were not lacking, though they lay out of sight, but sentimentalities he altogether denied.

Left alone in the sitting-room after Chilcote's departure, his first sensation was one of physical discomfort and unfamiliarity. His own clothes, with their worn looseness, brought no sense of friendliness such as some men find in an old garment. Lounging, and the clothes that suggested lounging, had no appeal for him. In his eyes the garb that implies responsibility was symbolic and even inspiring.

And, as with clothes, so with his actual surroundings. Each detail of his room was familiar, but not one had ever become intimately close. He had used the place for years, but he had used it as he might use a hotel; and whatever of his household goods had come with him remained, like himself, on sufferance. His entrance into Chilcote's surroundings had been in the position of a young artist who, having roughly modelled in clay, is brought into the studio of a sculptor. To his outward vision everything is new, but his inner sight leaps to instant understanding. Amid all the strangeness he recognizes the one essential—the workshop, the atmosphere, the home.

On his first night of return Loder comprehended something of his position; and, comprehending, he faced the problem and fought with it.

He had made his bargain and must pay his share. Weighing this, he had looked about his room with a quiet gaze. Then at last, as if finding the object really sought for, his eyes had come round to the mantelpiece and rested on the pipe-rack. The pipes stood precisely as he had left them. He had looked at them for a long time, then an ironic expression that was almost a smile had touched his lips, and, crossing the room, he had taken the oldest and blackest from its place and slowly filled it with tobacco.

With the first indrawn breath of smoke his attitude had unbent. Without conscious determination, he had chosen the one factor capable of easing his mood. A cigarette is for the trivial moments of life; a cigar for its fulfilments, its pleasant, comfortable retrospections; but in real distress—in the solving of question, the fighting of difficulty—a pipe is man's eternal solace.

So he had passed the first night of his return to the actualities of life. Next day his mind was somewhat settled and outward aid was not so essential; but though facts faced him more solidly, they were nevertheless very drab in shade. The necessity for work, that blessed antidote to enamel, no longer forced him to endeavor. He was no longer penniless; but the money he possessed brought with it no desires. When a man has lived from hand to mouth for years, and suddenly finds himself with a hundred pounds in his pocket, the result is sometimes curious. He finds with a vague sense of surprise that he has forgotten how to spend. That extravagance, like other artificial passions, requires cultivation.

This he realized even more fully on the days that followed the night of his first return; and with it was born a new bitterness. The man who has friends and no money may find life difficult; but the man who has money and no friend to rejoice in his fortune or benefit by his generosity is worse indeed. With the lesson of incredulity that works in all strong natures, Loder distrusted the professional beggar—therefore the charity that bestows easily and promiscuously was denied him; and of other channels of generosity he was too self-contained to have learned the secret.

To be Continued

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 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 under the lax British policy. In the fog Chilcote jostles a stranger and, striking a match to light his cigarette, is startled to see that the other man is his exact counterpart. They exchange cards, the stranger's revealing him to be

JOHN LODER. His nerves shattered by drugs, Chilcote seeks solace in the company of

LADY ASTRUPP, then goes back to Parliament, where he finds himself unequal to his duties, despite the urgings of

FRAIDE, his party leader. Realizing he has become a hopeless slave to drug, Chilcote goes to the humble apartment of Loder and proposes they exchange places in the world. Loder, in Chilcote's clothes, goes to Chilcote's home, is unsuspected by the maid and the new secretary,

GREENING, and settles himself comfortably in Chilcote's comfortable room. There is a swish of skirts, a knock and a woman enters. It is

EVE, Chilcote's wife, and Loder not only passes this acid test but in the days that follow wins something of her confidence as well as Fraide's marked political adoption of him. Meantime Loder is dreading recall by Chilcote.

That she was Chilcote's wife, Loder instinctively realized the moment she entered the room. Guy Bates Post as John Loder and Ruth Sinclair as Eve Chilcote in "The Masquerader."