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

SEVENTH INSTALLMENT

Chapter XII—Continued

When depression falls upon a man of usually even temperament it descends with a double weight. The mercurial nature has a hundred counterbalancing devices to rid itself of gloom—a sudden lifting of spirit, a memory of other moods lived through, other blacknesses dispersed by time; but the man of level nature has none of these. Depression, when it comes, is indeed depression; no phase of mind to be superseded by another phase, but a slackening of all the chords of life.

It was through such a depression as this that he labored during three weeks, while no summons and no hint of remembrance came from Chilcote. His position was peculiarly difficult. He found no action in the present, and towards the future he dared not trust himself to look. He had slipped the old moorings that familiarity had rendered endurable; but having slipped them, he had found no substitute. Such was his case on the last night of the three weeks, and such his frame of mind as he crossed Fleet Street from Clifford's Inn to Middle Temple Lane.

It was scarcely seven o'clock, but already the dusk was falling; the greater press of vehicles had ceased, and the light of the street lamps gleamed back from the spaces of dry and polished roadway, worn smooth as a mirror by wheels and hoofs. Something of the solitude of night that sits so ill on the strenuous city street was making itself felt, though the throngs of people on the pathway still streamed eastward and westward and the taverns made a busy trade.

Having crossed the roadway, Loder paused for a moment to survey the scene. But humanity in the abstract made small appeal to him, and his glance wandered from the passers-by to the buildings massed like clouds against the dark sky. As his gaze moved slowly from one to the other a clock near at hand struck seven, and an instant later the chorus was taken up by a dozen clamorous tongues. Usually he scarcely heard, and never heeded, these innumerable chimes; but this evening their effect was strange. Coming out of the darkness, they seemed to possess a personal note, a human declaration. The impression was fantastic, but it was strong; with a species of revolt against life and his own personality, he turned slowly and moved forward in the direction of Ludgate Hill.

For a space he continued his course, then, reaching Bouverie Street, he turned sharply to the right and made his way down the slight incline that leads to the Embankment. There he paused and drew a long breath. The sense of space and darkness soothed him. Pulling his cap over his eyes, he crossed to the river and walked on in the direction of Westminster Bridge.

As he walked the great mass of water by his side looked dense and smooth as oil with its sweeping width and network of reflected light. On its farther bank rose the tall buildings, the chimneys, the flaring lights that suggest another and an alien London; close at hand stretched the solid stone parapet, giving assurance of protection.

All these things he saw with his mental eyes, but with his mental eyes only, for his physical gaze was fixed ahead where the Houses of Parliament loomed out of the dusk. From the great building his eyes never wavered until the Embankment was traversed and Westminster Bridge reached. There he paused, resting his arms on the coping of the bridge.

In the dense quietude of the darkness the place looked vast and imposing. The shadowy Terrace, the silent river, the mass of lighted windows, each was significant. Shoulders bent (unconsciously his shoulders bent) from one to the other. He was no sentimentalist and no dreamer; his act was simply the act of a man whose impressionable mind, jolted of its normal orbit, turn instinctively towards the forms and symbols of the work that is denied them. His scrutiny was steady—even cold. He was raised to no exhilarating by the vastness of the building, nor was he chilled by any dwarfing of himself. He looked at it long and thoughtfully; then, again moving slowly, he turned and retraced his steps.

His mind was full as he walked back, still oblivious of the stone parapet of the Embankment, the bare trees, and the flaring lights of the advertisements across the water. Turning to the left, he regained Fleet Street and made for his own habitation with the quiet accuracy that some men exhibit in moments of absorption.

He crossed Clifford's Inn with the same slow, almost listless step; then, as his own doorway came into view, he stopped. Some one was standing in its recess.

For a moment he wondered if his fancy were playing him a trick; then his reason sprang to certainty with so fierce a leap that for an instant his mind recoiled. For we more often stand aghast at the strength of our own feelings than before the mortality of our neighbor's actions.

"Is that you, Chilcote?" he said, below his breath.

At the sound of his voice the other wheeled round. "Hallo!" he said. "I thought you were the ghost of some old inhabitant. I suppose I am very unexpected?"

Loder took the hand that he extended and pressed the fingers unconsciously. The sight of this man was like the finding of an oasis at the point where the desert is sandiest, deadliest, most unbearable.

"Yes, you are—unexpected," he answered.

Chilcote looked at him, then looked out into the court. "I'm done up," he said. "I'm right at the end of the tether." He laughed as he said it, but in the dim light of the hall Loder thought his face looked ill and harassed despite the flush that the excitement of the meeting had brought to it. Taking his arm, he drew him towards the stairs.

"So the rope has run out, eh?" he said, in imitation of the other's tone. But under the quiet of his manner his own nerves were throbbing with the peculiar alertness of anticipation; a sudden sense of mastery over life, that lifted him above surroundings and above persons, a sense of stature, mental and physical, from which he surveyed the world. He felt as if fate, in the guise of mere darkness, had given him a sign.

As they crossed the hall, Chilcote had drawn ahead, and was already mounting the stairs. And as Loder followed, it came shortly to his mind that here, in the stripped freedom of a door that was always open and stairs that were innocent of covering, lay his companion's real niche—unrecognized in outward avowal, but acknowledged by the inward, keener sense that manifests the individual.

In silence they mounted the stairs, but on the first landing Chilcote paused and looked back, surveying Loder from the superior height of two steps.

"I did very well at first," he said. "I did very well—I almost followed your example, for a week or so. I found myself on a sort of pinnacle—and I clung on. But in the last ten days I've—I've rather lapsed."

"Why?" Loder avoided looking at his face; he kept his eyes fixed determinedly on the spot where his own hand gripped the banister.

"Why?" Chilcote repeated. "Oh, the prehistoric tale—weakness stronger than strength. I'm—I'm sorry to come down on you like this, but it's the social side that bowls me over. It's the social side I can't stick."

"The social side? But I thought—"

"Don't think. I never think; it entails such a constant upsetting of principles and theories. We did arrange for business only, but one can't set up barriers. Society pushes itself everywhere nowadays—into business most of all. I don't want you for theatre-parties or dinners. But a big reception with a political flavor is different. A man has to be seen at these things; he needn't say anything or do anything, but it's bad form if he fails to show up."

Loder raised his head. "You must explain," he said, abruptly.

Chilcote started slightly at the sudden demand.

"I—I suppose I'm rather irrelevant," he said, quickly. "Fact is, there's a reception at the Bramfells' tonight. You know Blanche Bramfell—Viscountess Bramfell, sister of Lillian Astrupp." His words conveyed nothing to Loder, but he did not consider that. All explanations were irksome to him and he invariably chafed to be done with them.

"And you've got to put in an appearance—for party reasons?" Loder broke in.

Chilcote showed relief. "Yes. Old Fraide makes rather a point of it—so does Eve." He said the last words carelessly; then, as if their sound recalled something, his expression changed. A touch of satirical amusement touched his lips and he laughed.

"By the way, Loder," he said, "my wife was actually tolerant of me for nine or ten days after my return. I thought your representation was to be quite impersonal? I'm not jealous," he laughed. "I'm not jealous, I assure you; but the burned child shouldn't grow absent-minded."

At his tone and his laugh Loder's blood stirred; with a sudden, unexpected impulse his hand tightened on the banister, and, looking up, he caught sight of the face above him—his own face, it seemed, alight with malicious interest. At the sight a strange sensation seized him; his grip on the banister loosened, and, pushing past Chilcote, he hurriedly mounted the stairs.

Outside his own door the other overtook him.

"Loder!" he said. "Loder! I meant no harm. A man must have a laugh sometimes."

But Loder was facing the door and did not turn round.

A sudden fear shook Chilcote. "Loder!" he exclaimed again, "you wouldn't desert me? I can't go back tonight. I can't go back."

Still Loder remained immovable.

Alarmed by his silence, Chilcote stepped closer to him.

"Loder! Loder, you won't desert me?" He caught hastily at his arm.

With a quick repulsion Loder shook him off; the move almost as quickly he turned round.

"What fools we all are!" he said, abruptly. "We only differ in degree. Come in, and let us change our clothes."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE best moments of a man's life are the moments when, strong in himself, he feels that the world lies before him. Gratified ambition may be the summer, but anticipation is the ardent spring-time of a man's career.

As Loder drove that night from Fleet Street to Grosvenor Square he realized this—though scarcely with any degree of consciousness—for he was no accomplished self-analyst. But in a wave of feeling too vigorous to be denied he recognized his regained foothold—the step that lifted him at once from the pit to the pinnacle.

In that moment of realization he looked neither backward nor forward. The present was all-sufficing. Difficulties might loom ahead, but difficulties had but one object—the testing and sharpening of a man's strength. In the first deep surge of egotistical feeling he almost rejoiced in Chilcote's weakness. The more Chilcote tangled the threads of his life, the stronger must be the fingers that unravelled them. He was possessed by a great impatience; the joy the action was stirring in his blood.

Leaving the cab, he walked confidently to the door of Chilcote's house and inserted the latchkey. Even in this small act there was a grain of individual satisfaction. Then very quietly he opened the door and crossed the hall.

As he entered, a footman was arranging the fire that burned in the big grate. Seeing the man, he halted.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked, in unconscious repetition of his first question in the same house.

The man looked up. "She has just finished dinner, sir. She dined alone in her own room." He glanced at Loder in the quick, uncertain way that was noticeable in all the servants of the household when they addressed their master. Loder saw the look and wondered what depth of curiosity it betrayed, how much of insight into the domestic life that he must always be content to skim. For an instant the old resentment against Chilcote tinged his exaltation, but he swept it angrily aside. Without further remark he began to mount the stairs.

Gaining the landing, he did not turn as usual to the door that shut off Chilcote's rooms, but moved onward down the corridor towards Eve's private sitting-room. He moved slowly till the door was reached; then he paused and lifted his hand. There was a moment's wait while his fingers rested on the handle; then a sensation he could not explain—a reticence, a reluctance to intrude upon this one precinct—caused his fingers to relax. With a slightly embarrassed gesture he drew back slowly and retraced his steps.

Once in Chilcote's bedroom, he walked to the nearest bell and pressed it. Renwick responded, and at sight of him Loder's feelings warmed with the same sense of fitness and familiarity that the great bed and sombre furniture of the room had inspired.

But the man did not come forward as he had expected. He remained close to the door with a hesitation that was unusual in a trained servant. It struck Loder that possibly his stolidity had exasperated Chilcote, and that possibly Chilcote had been at no pains to conceal the exasperation. The idea caused him to smile involuntarily.

"Come into the room, Renwick," he said. "It's uncomfortable to see you standing there. I want to know if Mrs. Chilcote has sent me any message about tonight."

Renwick studied him furtively as he came forward. "Yes, sir," he said. "Mrs. Chilcote's maid said that the carriage was ordered for ten-fifteen, and she hoped that would suit you." He spoke reluctantly, as if expecting a rebuke.

At the opening sentence Loder had turned aside, but now, as the man finished, he wheeled round again and looked at him closely with his keen, observant eyes.

"Look here," he said. "I can't have you speak to me like that. I may come down on you rather sharply when my—my nerves are bad; but when I'm myself I treat you—well, I treat you decently, at any rate. You'll have to learn to discriminate. Look at me now!" A thrill of risk and of rulership passed through him as he spoke. "Look at me now! Do I look as I looked this morning—or yesterday?"

The man eyed him half stupidly, half timidly.

"Well?" Loder insisted.

"Well, sir," Renwick responded, with some slowness, "you look the same—and you look different. A healthier color, perhaps, sir—and the eye clearer." He grew more confident under Loder's half-humorous, half-insistent gaze. "Now that I look closer, sir—"

Loder laughed. "That's it!" he said. "Now that you look closer. You'll have to pour observant—observation is an [illegible] quality in a servant. When you come into a room in future, look straight at all of me—and take your [illegible] from that. Remember that [illegible] nerves is like serving two masters. Now you can go; and tell Mrs. Chilcote's maid that I shall be quite ready at a quarter-past ten."

"Yes, sir. And after that?"

"Nothing further. I shan't want you again tonight." He turned away as he spoke, and moved towards the great fire that was always kept alight in Chilcote's room. But as the man moved towards the door he wheeled back again. "Oh, one thing more, Renwick! Bring me some sandwiches and a whiskey." He remembered for the first time that he had eaten nothing since early afternoon.

At a few minutes after ten Loder left Chilcote's room, resolutely descended the stairs and took up his position in the hall. Resolution is a strong word to apply to such a proceeding, but something in his bearing, in the attitude of his shoulders and head, instinctively suggested it.

Five or six minutes passed, but he waited without impatience; then at last the sound of a carriage stopping before the house caused him to lift his head, and at the same instant Eve appeared at the head of the staircase.

She stood there for a second, looking down on him, her maid a pace or two behind, holding her cloak. The picture she made struck upon his mind with something of a revelation.

On his first sight of her she had appealed to him as a strange blending of youth and self-possession—a girl with a woman's clearer perception of life; later, he had been drawn to study her in other aspects—as a possible comrade and friend; now for the first time he saw her as a power in her own world, a woman to whom no man could deny consideration. She looked taller for the distance between them, and the distinction of her carriage added to the effect. Her black gown was exquisitely soft—as soft as her black hair; above her forehead was a cluster of splendid diamonds shaped like a coronet, and a band of the same stones encircled her neck. Loder realized in a glance that only the most distinguished of women could wear such ornaments and not have her beauty eclipsed. With a touch of the old awkwardness that had before assailed him in her presence he came slowly forward as she descended the stairs.

"Can I help you with your cloak?" he asked. And as he asked it something like surprise at his own humility crossed his mind.

For a second Eve's glance rested on his face. Her expression was quite impassive, but as she lowered her lashes a faint gleam flickered across her eyes; nevertheless, her answer, when it came, was studiously courteous.

"Thank you," she said, "but Marie will do all I want."

Loder looked at her for a moment, then turned aside. He was not hurt by his rebuff; rather, by an interesting sequence of impressions, he was stirred by it. The pride that had refused Chilcote's help and the self-control that had refused it graciously moved him to admiration. He understood and appreciated both by the light of personal experience.

"The carriage is waiting, sir," Crapham's voice broke in.

Loder nodded, and Eve turned to her maid. "That will do, Marie," she said. "I shall want a cup of chocolate when I get back—probably at one o'clock." She drew her cloak about her shoulders and moved towards the door. Then she paused and looked back. "Shall we start?" she asked, quietly.

Loder, still watching her, came forward at once. "Certainly," he said, with unusual gentleness.

He followed her as she crossed the footpath, but made no further offer of help; and when the moment came he quietly took his place beside her in the carriage. His last impression, as the horses wheeled round, was of the open hall door—Crapham in his sombre livery and the maid in her black dress, both silhouetted against the dark background of the hall; then, as the carriage moved forward smoothly and rapidly, he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

During the first few moments of the drive there was silence. To Loder there was a strange, new sensation in this companionship, so close and yet so distant. He was so near to Eve that the slight fragrant scent from her clothes might almost have belonged to his own. The impression was confusing yet vaguely delightful. It was years since he had been so close to a woman of his own class—his own caste. He acknowledged the thought with a curious sense of pleasure. Involuntarily he turned and looked at her.

She was sitting very straight, her fine profile cut clear against the carriage window, her diamonds quivering in the light that flashed by them from the street. For a space the sense of unreality that had pervaded his first entrance into Chilcote's life touched him again, then another and more potent feeling rose to quell it. Almost involuntarily as he looked at her his lips parted.

"May I say something?" he asked.

Eve remained motionless. She did not turn her head, as most women would have done. "Say anything you like," she said gravely.

"Anything?" He been a little nearer, filled again by the inordinate wish to dominate.

"Of course."

It seemed to him that her voice sounded forced and a little tired. For a moment he looked through the window at the passing lights; then slowly his gaze returned to her face.

"You look very beautiful tonight," he said. His voice was low and his manner unemotional, but his words had the effect he desired.

She turned her head, and her eyes met his in a glance of curiosity and surprise.

Slight as the triumph was, it thrilled him. The small scene with Chilcote's valet came back to him; his own personality moved him again to a reckless determination to make his own voice heard. Leaning forward, he laid his hand lightly on her arm.

"Eve," he said, quickly—"Eve, do you remember—" Then he paused and withdrew his hand. The horses had slackened speed, then stopped altogether as the carriage fell into line outside Bramfell House.

CHAPTER XIV

LODER entered Lady Bramfell's feeling far more like an actor in a drama than an ordinary man in a peculiar situation. It was the first time he had played Chilcote to a purely social audience, and the first time for many years that he had rubbed shoulders with a well-dressed crowd ostensibly brought together for amusement. As he followed Eve along the corridor that led to the reception-rooms he questioned the reality of the position again and again; then abruptly, at the moment when the sensation of unfamiliarity was strongest, a cheery voice hailed him, and, turning, he saw the square shoulders, light eyes, and pointed mustache of Lakely, the owner of the St. George's Gazette.

At the sight of the man and the sound of his greeting his doubts and speculations vanished. The essentials of life rose again to the position they had occupied three weeks ago, in the short but strenuous period when his dormant activities had been stirred and he had recognized his true self. He lifted his head unconsciously, his sense of misgiving that had crept into his consciousness pressing from his [illegible] as Lakely with a keen, alert pleasure that altered his whole face.

Eve, looking back, saw the expression. It attracted and held her, like a sudden glimpse into a secret room. In all the years of her marriage, in the months of her courtship even she had never surprised the look on Chilcote's face. The impression came quickly, and with it a strange, warm rush of interest that receded slowly, leaving an odd sense of loneliness. But, at the moment that the feeling came and passed, her attention was claimed in another direction. A slight, fair-haired boy forced his way towards her through the press of people that filled the corridor.

"Mrs. Chilcote!" he exclaimed. "Can I believe my luck in finding you alone?"

Eve laughed. It seemed that there was relief in her laugh. "How absurd you are, Bobby!" she said, kindly. "But you are wrong. My husband is here—I am waiting for him."

Blessington looked round. "Oh!" he said. "Indeed!" Then he relapsed into silence. He was the soul of good-nature, but those who knew him best knew that Chilcote's summary change of secretaries had rankled. Eve, conscious of the little jar, made haste to smooth it away.

"Tell me about yourself," she said. "What have you been doing?"

Blessington looked at her, then smiled again, his buoyancy restored. "Doing?" he said. "Oh, calling every other afternoon at Grosvenor Square—only to find that a certain lady is never at home."

At his tone Eve laughed again. The boy, with his frank and ingenuous nature, had beguiled many a dull hour for her in past days, and she had missed him not a little when his place had been filled by Greening.

"But I mean seriously, Bobby. Has something good turned up?"

Blessington made a wry face. "Something is on its way—that's why I am on duty tonight. Old Bramfell and the peer are working it between them. So if Lady Bramfell or Lady Astrupp happen to drop a pin or a handkerchief this evening, I've got to be here to pick it up. See?"

"As you picked up my fans and handkerchiefs last year—and the year before?" Eve smiled.

Blessington's face suddenly looked grave. "I wish you hadn't said that," he said. Then he paused abruptly, one of the line of talk behind them a man's laugh sounded. It was not loud, but was a laugh that one seldom hears in a London drawing-room. It expressed intense enjoyment, and in a surreptitious way it seemed also to express strength.

Eve and Blessington both turned involuntarily.

"By Jove!" said Blessington.

Eve said nothing.

Loder was parting with Lakely, and his was the laugh that had attracted them both. The interest excited by his talk was still reflected in his face and bearing as he made his way towards them.

"By Jove!" said Blessington again. "I never realized that Chilcote was so tall."

Again Eve said nothing. But silently and with a more subtle meaning she found herself echoing the words.

Until he was quite close to her, Loder did not seem to see her. Then he stopped quietly.

"I was speaking to Lakely," he said. "He wants me to dine with him one night at Cadogan Gardens."

But Eve was silent, waiting for him to address Blessington. She glanced at him quickly, but though their eyes met he did not catch the meaning that lay in hers. It was a difficult moment. She had known him incredibly, almost unpardonably, absent-minded but it had invariably been when he was suffering from "nerves," as she phrased it to herself. But to-night he was obviously in the possession of unclouded faculties. She colored slightly and glanced under her lashes at Blessington. Had the same idea struck him, she wondered? But he was studiously studying a suit of Chinese armor that stood closely in a niche of the wall.

"Bobby has been keeping me amused while you talked to Mr. Lakely," she said pointedly.

Directly addressed, Loder turned and looked at Blessington. "How d'you?" he said with doubtful cordiality. The name of Bobby conveyed nothing to him.

To his surprise, Eve seemed annoyed, and Blessington's fresh-colored face deepened in tone. With a slow, uncomfortable sensation he was aware of having struck a wrong note.

There was a short, unpleasant pause. Then, more by intuition than actual sight, Blessington saw Eve's eyes turn from him to Loder, and with quick tact he saved the situation.

"How d'you do, sir?" he responded, with a smile. "I congratulate you on looking so—so uncommon well. I was just telling Mrs. Chilcote that I hold a commission for Lady Astrupp to-night. I'm a sort of scout at present—reporting on the outposts." He spoke fast and without much meaning, but his boyish voice eased the strain.

Eve thanked him with a smile. "Then we mustn't interfere with a person on active service," she said. "Besides, we have our own duties to get through." She smiled again, and, touching Loder's arm, indicated the reception rooms.

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 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 maturity under the lax British policy. In the dense fog Chilcote jostles a stranger and, lighting his cigarette, Chilcote 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. Depressed and unstrung the next morning, Chilcote seeks solace in the company of

LADY ASTRUPP, then he goes to Parliament where he makes a near spectacle of himself, despite the promptings of his party leader,

FRAIDE. Realizing that he is a hopeless slave to drug, Chilcote goes to Loder and offers to change places in life with him. Loder agrees and so successful is he that he not only becomes a strong political lieutenant of Fraide but is never suspected by the servants or Chilcote's wife,

EVE. He is recalled to his own home by Chilcote, who steps back again into his own shoes for the time being at least. Having tasted some of the wine of life, Loder is reflecting smoothly.

He turned slowly and moved forward in the direction of Ludgate Hill. [Scene from "The Masquerader."]

Her black gown was exquisitely soft.