

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

TENTH INSTALLMENT

Chapter XVIII—Continued

"Well," he said, "what do you think of this? How's this for a compliment?"

Loder turned round. "I think," he said, quietly, "that we can't overestimate it."

Lakely laughed and took a long pull at his cigar. "And we mustn't be afraid to let the Serborough crowd know it, eh?" He waved his hand to the poster of the first edition that hung before his desk.

Loder, following his glance, smiled. Lakely laughed again. "They might have known it all along," he said. "Did they really believe that Russia was going to sit calmly looking across the Herd Bay while the Shah played at mobilizing? But what became of you last night? We had a regular professor of the whole business at Serborough; the great Fraide looked in for five minutes. I went on with him to the late afternoon and was there when the news came in. 'Twas a great night!'"

Loder's face lighted up. "I can imagine it," he said, with an unusual touch of warmth.

Lakely watched him intently for a moment. Then with a quick action he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk.

"It's going to be something more than imagination for you, Chilcote," he said impressively. "It's going to be sold earnestly." He spoke rapidly and with rather more than his usual shrewd decisiveness; then he paused to see the effect of his announcement.

Loder was still studying the flaring poster. At the other's words he turned sharply. "Something in Lakely's voice, something in his manner, arrested him. A tinge of color crossed his face.

"Reality?" he said. "What do you mean?"

For a further space his companion watched him; then with a rapid movement he tilted back his chair.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, old Fraide's instincts are never far out. He's quite right. You're the man?"

Still quietly, but with a strange undeglow of excitement, Loder left the fire, and, coming forward, took a chair at Lakely's desk.

"Do you mind telling me what you're driving at?" he asked, in his old, laconic voice.

Lakely still scrutinized him with an air of brisk satisfaction; then with a gesture of finality he tossed his cigar away.

"My dear chap," he said, "there's going to be a breach somewhere—and Fraide says you're the man to step in and fill it. You see, five years ago, when things looked lively on the Gulf and the Bandar Abbas business came to light, you did some promising work; and a reputation like that sticks to a man—even when he turns snacker! I won't deny that you've slacked abominably," he added, as Loder made an uneasy movement, "but slacking has different effects. Some men run to seed, others mature. I had almost put you down on the black list, but I've altered my mind in the last two months."

Again Loder stirred in his seat. A host of emotions were stirring in his mind. Every word wrong from Lakely was another stimulus to pride, another subtle tribute to the cautious force of personality.

"Well?" he said. "Well?"

Lakely smiled. "We all know that Serborough's ministry is—well, top heavy," he said. "Serborough's indulging his card hands just a story too high. It's a necessary what'll upset the balance. It might be education, or it might be as well be a matter of foreign policy."

They looked at each other in companionable silence.

"You know as well as I that it's not the question of whether Russia comes into Persia, but the question of whether Russia goes out of Persia when those Hazaras are subdued? I'll lay you what you like, Chilcote, that within one week we hear that the Hazaras are suppressed, but that Russia, instead of retiring, has advanced those troops to only India and comfortably established herself at Serborough. It's a necessary result of the island of Adenah? Or is it the result of a more subtle, more insidious, more energetic figure, by the intensity of his interest."

"If this news comes before the Easter recess," he went on, "the first nail can be hammered in on the motion for adjournment. And if the right man does it in the right way, I'll lay my life 'twill be a nail in Serborough's coffin."

Loder sat very still. Overwhelming possibilities had suddenly opened before him. In a moment the uncertainty of the past months had become a real, tangible justification of himself and his imposture was suddenly made possible. In the stress of understanding he, too, leaned forward, and, resting his elbows on the desk, took his face between his hands.

For a space Lakely made no remark. No man and man's moodiness seemed to interest to his eyes and he was silent. That Chilcote had been a member of the cabinet of the glorified had been a matter of only natural consequence. He had seen that cautious, calculating gravity seemed to be a necessary part of the man's nature. He was silent.

THE CHARACTERS IN THE STORY

JOHN CHILCOTE, member of the House of Commons, a party to a marriage of convenience, and confirmed drug addict, changes places in life with

JOHN LODER, who is his exact counterpart in appearance, after making a near spectacle of himself in Parliament, despite the promptings of

FRAIDE, the great party leader. So successful is the deception that Loder becomes not only the strong political lieutenant of Fraide but is never suspected by the servants or by Chilcote's beautiful wife,

EVE, who, however, is mystified by her husband's change in manner. At a social function Loder is inveigled into a darkened tent, where

LADY LILLIAN ASTRUP, close associate of Chilcote, is indulging her hobby of crystal-gazing and makes him remove his rings, exposing the give-away scar on his finger. Realizing his great danger Loder induces

BLESSINGTON to tell her she had been deceived by the darkness in her first belief that Chilcote was the subject. The following morning his fears are submerged by the interest he takes in the news of political developments in Persia, Russia having despatched a large armed force to the seat of the insurrection against the Shah. In response to a message he goes to the office of

LAKELY, publisher of St. George's Gazette.

CHAPTER XIX

AND so it came about that Loder was freed from one responsibility to undertake another. From the morning of March 27th, when Lakely had expounded the political programme in the offices of the St. George's Gazette, to the afternoon of April 1st he found himself a central figure in the whirlwind of activity that formed itself in Conservative circles.

With the program for which he was now bound, Lakely had touched the bottom of the situation on that morning and succeeding evenings, each evening with his own lips, and had established the precision of his forecast.

Minutely watchful of Russia's attitude, Lakely quickly organized his forces and strengthened his position with a statesmanlike grasp of opportunity; and to Loder the attributes displayed by his leader during those trying days formed an endless and absorbing study. Settling the thought of Chilcote aside, ignoring his own position and the risks he daily ran, he and fully yielded to the glamour of the moment, and in the first freedom of a loose rein he had given unconsciously all that he possessed of intellect, capacity, and determination to the cause that had claimed him.

Stagnantly paralyzed in a constant personal contact with Fraide, he learned many valuable lessons of tact and organization in those five vital days during which the tactics of a whole party hung upon one thin line of success or failure. For should Russia substitute the intrigues of the peace-makers, the political arena would remain undisturbed; but should the adventurous movement predicted by Lakely be accepted first before Parliament rose for the Easter recess, then the first blow in the fight that would rage during the succeeding session must inevitably be struck. In the mean time it was Fraide's difficult position to wait and watch and yet preserve his dignity.

It was early in the afternoon of March 27th that Loder, in response to a long-standing invitation, lunched quietly with the Fraides. Being displayed by some communications from work, he was a few minutes late in leaving his appointment, and on his hurried return into the drawing-room found the little group of three that was to make up the party already assembled—Fraide, Lady Sarah—and Eve. As he entered the room they ceased to speak, and all three turned in his direction.

In the first moment he had a vague impression of responding suitably to Lady Sarah's cordial greeting; but he knew that immediately and unconsciously his eyes turned to Eve, while a quick sense of surprise and satisfaction passed through him at sight of her. For an instant he wondered how she would mark his avoidance of her since their last encounter; then instantly he blamed himself for the passing doubt. For, before all things, he knew her to be a woman of the world.

He took Fraide's outstretched hand; and again he looked towards Eve, waiting for her to speak.

She met his glance, but said nothing. Instead of speaking she smiled at him—a smile that was far more reassuring than any words, a smile that in a single second conveyed forgiveness, appreciation, and a warm, almost tender sense of sympathy and comprehension. The remembrance of that smile stayed with him after they were seated at table; and far into the future the remembrance of the lunch itself, with its pleasant private sense of satisfaction, was destined to return to him in retrospective moments. The delightful atmosphere of the Fraides' home life had always been a wonder and an enigma to him; but on this day he seemed to grasp its meaning by a new light, as he watched Eve soften under its influence and felt himself drawn imperceptibly from the position of a speculative outsider to that of an intimate. It was a fresh side to the complex, fascinating life of which Fraide was the master spirit.

These reflections had grown awfully familiar to his mind; the talk, momentarily diverted into social channels, was quietly drifting back to the inevitable question of the "situation" that in private moments was never far from their lips, when the event that was to mark and separate that day from those that had preceded it was unconsciously thrust upon them.

Without announcement or apology, the door was suddenly flung open and Lakely entered the room.

His face was brimming with ex-



He watched her in silence as she poured out the tea. (Guy Bates Post as John Loder and Ruth Sinclair as Eve Chilcote in "The Masquerader.")

citement, and his eyes flashed. At the first basin of the tray he failed to see that there were ladies in the room, and crossing instinctively to Fraide, had an open telegram before him. "This is official, sir," he said. Then at last he glanced round the table.

"Lady Sarah!" he exclaimed. "Can you forgive me? But I'd have given a hundred pounds to be the first with this!" He glanced back at Fraide.

Lady Sarah rose and stretched out her hand. "Mr. Loder," she said, "I more than understand!" There was a thrill in her warm, cordial voice, and her eyes also turned to watch her husband.

Of the whole party, Fraide alone was perfectly calm. He sat very still, his small, thin figure erect and dignified, as his eyes scanned the message that meant so much.

Eve, who had sprung from her seat and passed round the table at sound of Lakely's news, was leaning over his shoulder, reading the telegram with him. As she did, her face flushed with excitement.

"How splendid it must be to be a man!" she exclaimed. And without premeditation her eyes and Loder's met.

In this manner came the news from Persia, and with it Loder's definite end. In the momentary stress of action it was impossible that any thought of Chilcote could intrude itself. Events had followed each other too rapidly, decisive action had been too much thrust upon him, to allow of hesitation; and it was in this spirit, under this vigorous pressure, that he made his attack upon the government on the day that followed Fraide's luncheon party.

That indelible attentiveness, that alert sensation of impending storm, that so strong an index of the parliamentary atmosphere was very keen on that memorable first of April. It was obvious in the crowded benches on both sides of the House—in the openness of purpose that instinctively made itself felt through the ranks of the Opposition, and found definite expression in Fraide's stiff figure and tightly shut lips—in the unmistakable unconsciousness that lay upon the unsharpened benches.

But notwithstanding these indications of battle, the early portion of the proceedings was unmarked by excitement, being tinged with the purposeless lack of vitality that had of late marked all affairs of the Serborough Ministry; and it was not until the adjournment of the House for the Easter recess had at last been moved that the spirit of activity hovering in the air descended and galvanized the assembly into life. It was then, amid a stir of interest, that Loder slowly rose.

Many curious incidents have marked the speaking of the House of Commons, but it is doubtful whether it has ever been the lot of a member to bear his own voice raised for the first time on a subject of vital interest to his party, having been denied all initial assistance of introductory questions asked or unimportant amendments made. Of all those gathered together in the great building on that day, only one man appreci-

sharply consciousness of personal difficulties, was given immunity.

Pitching his voice in that quietly masterful tone that beyond all others compels attention, he took up his subject and dealt with it with dispassionate force. With great skill he touched on the steady southward advance of Russia into Persian territory from the distant days when, by a curious irony of fate, Russian and British enterprise combined to make entry into the country under the sanction of the Grand-Duke of Moscow, to the present hour, when this great power of Russia—long since alienated by interests and desires from her former co-operator—had taken a step which in the eyes of every thinking man must possess a deep significance. With quiet persistence he pointed out the peculiar position of Meshed in the distant province of Khorasan; its vast distance from the Persian Gulf, round which British interests and influence centre, and the consequently alarming position of hundreds of traders who, in the security of British sovereignty, are fighting their way upward from India, from Afghanistan, even from England herself.

Following up this point, he dilated on these subjects of the British crown who, cut off from adequate assistance, can only turn in personal or commercial profit to the protective power of the nearest consulate. Then, quietly demanding the attention of his hearers, he marshaled fact after fact to demonstrate the isolation and inadequacy of a consulate so situated; the all but arbitrary power of Russia, who in her new occupation of Meshed had only two considerations to withhold her from open aggression—the knowledge of England as a very considerable but also a very distant power; the knowledge of Persia as an imminent but wholly impotent factor in the case.

Having stated his opinions, he reverted to the motive of his speech—his desire to put forward a strong protest against the adjournment of the House without an assurance from the government that immediate measures would be taken to safeguard British interests in Meshed and throughout the province of Khorasan.

CHAPTER XX

ON the fifth day after the momentous 1st of April on which he had recalled Loder and resumed his own life Chilcote left his house and walked towards Bond Street. Though the morning was clear and the air almost warm for the time of the year, he was buttoned into a long overcoat and was wearing a muffler and a pair of doekskin gloves. As he passed along the street he kept close to the house fronts to avoid the sun that was everywhere stirring the winter-bound towns, like a suffusion of young blood through old veins. He avoided the warmth because in this instance warmth meant light, but as he moved he shivered slightly from time to time with the numbing, nerve-racking cold that of late had become his persistent enemy.

He was ill at ease as he hurried forward. With each succeeding day of the old life the new unguessed, the new obligations, became more hampering. Before his compact with Loder this old life had been a net about his feet; now the meshes seemed to have narrowed, the net itself to have spread until it smothered his whole being. His own household—his own rooms, even—offered no sanctuary. The presence of another personality tinged the atmosphere. It was preposterous, but it was undeniable. The lay figure that he had set in place had proved to be flesh and blood—had asserted his life, his position, his personality, by sheer right of strength. As he walked along Bond Street in the first sunshine of the year, jostled by the well-dressed crowd, he felt a paralysis.

He revisited at the new order of things, but the revolt was a silent one—the iron of expediency had entered into his soul. He dared not jeopardize Loder's position, because he dared not dispute with Loder. The door that guarded his vice drew him more resistently with every indulgence, and Loder's was the voice that called the "Open Sesame!"

He walked on absently. He had been but five days at home, and already the quiet, grass-grown court of Clifford's Inn, the bare staircase, the comfortable privacy of Loder's rooms seemed a haven of refuge. The speed with which this hunger had returned frightened him.

"My dear Chilcote," he said, "we are all proud of you." Then, looking up into his face, he added, in a graver tone, "But keep your mind upon the future; never be blinded by the present—however bright it seems."

At the touch of his hand, at the spontaneous approval of his first words, Loder's pride thrilled, and in a vehement rush of ambition his senses answered to the praise. Then, as Fraide in all unconsciousness added his second sentence, the hot glow of feeling suddenly chilled. In a sweep of intuitive reaction the meaning and the danger of his falsely real position extinguished his excitement and turned his triumph cold. With an involuntary gesture he withdrew his arm.

"You're very good, sir," he said. "And you're very right. We never should forget that there is—a future."

The old man glanced up, surprised by the tone.

"Quite so, Chilcote," he said, kindly. "But we only advise those in whom we believe to look towards it. Shall we find my wife? I know she will want to hear you home with us."

But Loder's joy in himself and his achievement had dropped from him. He shrank suddenly from Lady Sarah's congratulations and Eve's warm, silent approbation.

"Thanks, sir," he said, "but I don't feel fit for society. A touch of my nerves, I suppose." He laughed shortly. "But do you mind saying to me that I hope I may—satisfied?" He added this as if in half-reluctant afterthought. Then, with a slight pressure of Fraide's hand, he turned, evading the many groups that waited to claim him, and passed out of the House alone.

Hailing a cab, he drove to Grosvenor Square. All the exaltation of an hour ago had turned to ashes. His movement had found its culmination in a scene of futility and pronouncement.

He met no one in the hall or on the stairs of Chilcote's house, and on entering the study he found that also deserted. Greening had been a good deal absent lately, and he was alone.

listened to his speech. Passing at once into the room, he crossed as if by instinct to the desk, and there halted. On the top of some unopened letters lay the significant yellow envelope of a telegram—the telegram that in an unformed, subconscious way had sprung to his expectation on the moment of Fraide's congratulation.

Very quietly he picked it up, opened and read it, and, with the automatic caution that had become habitual, carried it across the room and dropped it in the fire. This done, he returned to the desk, read the letters that awaited Chilcote, and, scribbling the necessary notes upon the margins, left them in readiness for Greening. Then, moving with the same quiet suppression, he passed from the room, down the stairs, and out into the street by the way he had come.

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He fumbled for a moment with the collar of his coat, and glanced first upward towards Oxford Street.

But again Lillian smiled—this time to herself. If she understood anything on earth it was Chilcote and his mood.

"If one may be careless of anything, Jack," she said lightly, "truly it's of time. I can imagine being pressed for anything else in the world. If it's an appointment you're worrying about, a motor goes ever so much master than a cab—" She looked at him tentatively, her head slightly on one side, her muff raised till the roses end some of the soft fur touched her cheek.

She looked very charming and very persuasive as Chilcote glanced back. Again she seemed to represent a respite—something graceful and subtle in a world of oppressive obligations. His eyes strayed from her figure to the smart motor-car drawn up beside the curb.

She saw the glance. "Ever so much quicker," she insisted; and, smiling again, she stepped forward from the door of the shop. After a second's indecision Chilcote followed her.

The waiting car had three seats—two in front for the chauffeur, two vis-a-vis at the back, offering pleasant possibilities of a tete-a-tete.

"The Park—and drive slowly," Lillian ordered, as she stepped into the motor, nominating Chilcote to the seat opposite.

They moved up Bond Street smoothly and rapidly. Lillian was absorbed in the passing traffic until the Marble Arch was reached; then, as they glided through the big gates, she looked across at her companion. He had turned up the collar of his coat, though the wind was scarcely perceptible, and buried himself in it to the ears.

"It's extraordinary," she exclaimed, suddenly, as her eyes rested on his face. It was seldom that she felt drawn to exclamation. She was usually too inclined to show surprise. But now the feeling was called forth before she was aware.

Chilcote looked up. "What's extraordinary?" he said, sensitively.

She leaned forward for an instant and touched his hand.

"Ever so," she said, leavently. "Did I catch you for the wrong way?" Then, seeing his expression, she tactfully changed her tone. "All right! It was the same thing that struck me the night of Fraide's party—when you looked at me over Leonard Kilmie's head. You remember?" She glanced away from him across the Park to where the grass was already showing greener.

Chilcote felt ill at ease. Again he put his hand to his coat collar.

"Oh yes," he said hastily. "Yes!" He wished now that he had questioned Loder more closely on the proceedings of that party. It seemed to him, on looking back, that Loder had mentioned nothing on the day of their last exchange, but the political complications that absorbed his mind. "I couldn't explain," Lillian went on. "I couldn't explain before a crowd of people that it wasn't your dark head showing over Leonard's red one that surprised me, but the most wonderful, the most extraordinary likeness—" She paused.

The car was moving slowly; there was a delight in the easy motion through the fresh, early air. But Chilcote's uneasiness had been aroused. He no longer felt soothed.

"What likeness?" he asked, sharply.

She turned to him once more. "Oh, a likeness I have noticed before," she said. "A likeness that always seemed strange, but that suddenly became identical at Bianca's party."

He moved quickly. "Likenesses are an illusion," he said. "A mere suggestion of the brain!" His manner was short; his annoyance seemingly ceased to be a mere member of Parliament. Lillian looked at him afresh in slightly interested surprise.

"Yet not so very long ago, you, yourself—" she began.

"Nonsense!" he broke in. "I've always denied likenesses. Such things don't really exist. Likenesses are purely an individual matter—a pre-conception." He spoke fast; he was uneasy under the cool scrutiny of her green eyes. And with a sharp attempt at self-control and reassurance he altered his voice. "After all, we're being very stupid," he exclaimed. "We're worrying over something that doesn't exist."

Lillian was still largely interested. To her own belief, she had seen Chilcote last on the night of her sister's reception. Then she had been too preoccupied to notice either his manner or his health, though superficially it had appeared in her mind that he was somewhat unusually relaxed, unusually well on that night. A recollection of the impression on which she had based her opinion came back to her. "You were setting his eyes in the dull restlessness of eyes, the empty willowiness of skin."

Some shed of her thought, some suggestion of the comparison running through her mind, must have shown in her face, for Chilcote altered his position with a touch of uneasiness. He glanced away across the long sweep of tan-covered drive stretching between the trees; then he glanced furtively back.

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He revisited at the new order of things, but the revolt was a silent one—the iron of expediency had entered into his soul. He dared not jeopardize Loder's position, because he dared not dispute with Loder. The door that guarded his vice drew him more resistently with every indulgence, and Loder's was the voice that called the "Open Sesame!"

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He walked on absently. He had been but five days at home, and already the quiet, grass-grown court of Clifford's Inn, the bare staircase, the comfortable privacy of Loder's rooms seemed a haven of refuge. The speed with which this hunger had returned frightened him.

"My dear Chilcote," he said, "we are all proud of you." Then, looking up into his face, he added, in a graver tone, "But keep your mind upon the future; never be blinded by the present—however bright it seems."

At the touch of his hand, at the spontaneous approval of his first words, Loder's pride thrilled, and in a vehement rush of ambition his senses answered to the praise. Then, as Fraide in all unconsciousness added his second sentence, the hot glow of feeling suddenly chilled. In a sweep of intuitive reaction the meaning and the danger of his falsely real position extinguished his excitement and turned his triumph cold. With an involuntary gesture he withdrew his arm.

"You're very good, sir," he said. "And you're very right. We never should forget that there is—a future."

The old man glanced up, surprised by the tone.

"Quite so, Chilcote," he said, kindly. "But we only advise those in whom we believe to look towards it. Shall we find my wife? I know she will want to hear you home with us."

But Loder's joy in himself and his achievement had dropped from him. He shrank suddenly from Lady Sarah's congratulations and Eve's warm, silent approbation.

"Thanks, sir," he said, "but I don't feel fit for society. A touch of my nerves, I suppose." He laughed shortly. "But do you mind saying to me that I hope I may—satisfied?" He added this as if in half-reluctant afterthought. Then, with a slight pressure of Fraide's hand, he turned, evading the many groups that waited to claim him, and passed out of the House alone.

Hailing a cab, he drove to Grosvenor Square. All the exaltation of an hour ago had turned to ashes. His movement had found its culmination in a scene of futility and pronouncement.

He met no one in the hall or on the stairs of Chilcote's house, and on entering the study he found that also deserted. Greening had been a good deal absent lately, and he was alone.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON the fifth day after the momentous 1st of April on which he had recalled Loder and resumed his own life Chilcote left his house and walked towards Bond Street. Though the morning was clear and the air almost warm for the time of the year, he was buttoned into a long overcoat and was wearing a muffler and a pair of doekskin gloves. As he passed along the street he kept close to the house fronts to avoid the sun that was everywhere stirring the winter-bound towns, like a suffusion of young blood through old veins. He avoided the warmth because in this instance warmth meant light, but as he moved he shivered slightly from time to time with the numbing, nerve-racking cold that of late had become his persistent enemy.

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