

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

TWELFTH INSTALLMENT

Chapter XXII—Continued

Loder made no movement. "You must explain," he said, very quietly. Lillian smiled. "That's just what I want to do. When I was in my tent on the night of Blanche's party, a man came to be gazed for. He came just like anybody else, and laid his hands upon the table. He had strong, thin hands like well, rather like yours. But he wore two rings on the third finger of his left hand—a heavy signet-ring and a plain gold one."

Loder moved his hand imperceptibly till the cushion covered it. Lillian's words caused him no surprise, scarcely even a trepidation. He felt now that he had expected them, even waited for them, all along.

"I asked him to take off his rings," she went on, "and just for a second he hesitated—I could feel him hesitate; then he seemed to make up his mind, for he drew them off. He drew them off, Jack, and guess what I saw! Do you guess?"

For the first time Loder involuntarily drew back into the corner of the couch. "I never guess," he said, brusquely.

"Then I'll tell you. His hands were the hands of my Englishman! The rings covered the scar made by Ko Ko's teeth. I knew it instantly—the second my eyes rested on it. It was the same scar that I had found on dozens of those that I had seen huddled before I left Santafere."

"And you? What did you do?" Loder felt it singularly difficult and unpleasant to speak.

"Ah, that's the point. That's where I was stupid and made my mistake. I should have spoken to him on the spot, but I didn't. You know how one sometimes hesitates. Afterwards it was too late."

"But you saw him afterwards—in the rooms?" Loder spoke unwillingly.

"No, I didn't—that's the other point. I didn't see him in the rooms, and I haven't seen him since. Directly he was gone, I left the tent—I pretended to be hungry and bored; but, though I went through every room, he was nowhere to be found. Once—once I hesitated and laughed again—once I thought I had found him, but it was only you, you, you stood in that doorway with your mouth and chin hidden by Leonard Kaines' head. Wasn't it a quaint mistake?"

There was an uncertain pause. Then Loder, feeling the need of speech, broke the silence suddenly. "Where do I come in?" he asked abruptly. "What am I wanted for?"

"To help to throw light on the mystery," Lillian said, "and there wasn't a man I couldn't place—no outsider ever squeezed through Blanche's door. I have questioned Bobby Blesington, but he can't remember who came to the tent last. And Bobby was supposed to have kept count!" She spoke in deep scorn; but almost immediately the scorn faded and she smiled again. "Now that I've explained Jack," she added, "what do you suggest?"

"Then for the first time Loder knew what his presence in the room really meant; and at best the knowledge was disconcerting. It is not every day that a man is called upon to unearth himself.

"Suggest?" he repeated, blankly.

"Yes. I'd rather have your idea of the affair than anybody else's. You are so clear and sarcastic and keen that you can't help getting straight at the middle of a fact."

When Lillian wanted anything she could be very sweet. She suddenly dropped her half-pertinent tone; she suddenly ceased to be a spoiled child. With a perfectly peaceful movement she drew quite close to Loder and laid her head on his knee.

"This is an attitude that few women can safely assume; it requires all the attributes of youth, suppleness, and a certain innocent trust. But Lillian never acted without justification, and as she leaned towards Loder her face lifted, her slight figure and pale hair softened by the twilight, she made a picture that it would have been difficult to criticize.

But the person who should have appreciated it stared steadily beyond it to the fire. His mind was absorbed by one question—the question of how he might reasonably leave the house before discovery became assured.

Lillian, attentively watching of him, saw the uneasy look, and her own face fell. But, as she looked, an inspiration came to her—a remembrance of many interviews with Chilcote smoothed and facilitated by the timely use of tobacco.

"Jack," she said, softly, "before you say another word I insist on your lighting a cigarette." She leaned forward, resting against his knee.

"At her words Loder's eyes left the fire. His attention was suddenly needed for a new and more luminous difficulty. "Thanks!" he said, quickly. "I—I have no wish to smoke."

"It isn't a matter of what you wish but of what I say," she smiled. She knew that Chilcote with a cigarette between his lips was infinitely more tractable than Chilcote sitting idle, and she had no intention of ignoring the knowledge.

"But Loder caught at her words. "Before you ordered me to smoke," he said, "you told me to give you some advice. Your first command

must have prior claim." He grasped unhesitatingly at the less risky theme.

She looked up at him. "You're always nicer when you smoke," she persisted, caressingly. "Light a cigarette—and give me one."

Loder's mouth became set. "No," he said, "we'll stick to this advice business. It interests me."

"Yes—afterwards."

"No, now. You want to find out why this Englishman from Italy was at your sister's party, and why he disappeared?"

There are times when a malignant obstinacy seems to affect certain people. The answer Lillian made was to put a terrier hand over Loder's waistcoat, and feeling his cigarette case, to draw it from the pocket.

He affected not to see it. "Do you think he recognized you in that tent?" he inquired, desperately.

She held out the case. "Here are your cigarettes. You know we're all ways more social when we smoke."

In the short interval while she looked up into his face several ideas passed through Loder's mind. He thought of standing up suddenly and so regaining his advantage; he wondered quickly whether one hand could possibly suffice for the taking out and lighting of two cigarettes. Then all need for speculation was pushed suddenly aside.

Lillian, looking into his face, saw his fresh look of disturbance, and from long experience again changed her tactics. Laying the cigarette case on the couch, she put one hand on his shoulder, the other on his left arm. Hundreds of times this caressing touch had quieted Chilcote.

"Dear old boy!" she said, soothingly, her hand moving slowly down his arm.

In a flash of understanding the consequences of this position came to him. Action was imperative, at whatever risk. With an abrupt gesture he rose.

The movement was awkward. He got to his feet precipitately; Lillian drew back, surprised and startled, catching involuntarily at his left hand to steady her position.

Her fingers gripped at, then held him. He made no effort to release them. With a dogged acknowledgment, he admitted himself worsted.

How long she stayed immovable, holding his hand, neither of them knew. The process of a woman's instinct is subtle, so subtle, that it would be futile to apply it to the commonplace test of time. She kept her hold tenaciously, as though his fingers possessed some peculiar virtue that she must have.

"Things, Jack?" she said, very slowly. And under the two short words a whole world of incredulity and surprise made itself felt.

Loder laughed. "At the sound she dropped his hand and rose from her knees. What her suspicions, what her instincts were she could not have clearly defined, but her action was unmistakable. Without a moment's uncertainty she turned to the fireplace, pressed the electric button, and flooded the room with light.

There is no force so demoralizing as unexpected light. Loder took a step backward, his hand hanging ungoverned by his side; and Lillian, stepping forward, caught it again before he could protest. Lifting it quickly, she looked scrutinizingly at the two rings.

All women jump to conclusions, and it is extraordinary how seldom they jump short. Seeing only what Lillian saw, knowing only what she knew, no man would have staked a definite opinion; but the other sex takes a different view. As she stood kneeling at the rings her thoughts and her conclusions sped through her mind like arrows—aimed and all tending towards one point. She remembered the day when she and Chilcote had talked of doubts, her scepticism and his vehement defence of the idea; his sudden interest in the look "Other Men's Shoes," and his anathema against life and its thousand round duties. She recalled her own first conviction of recognition of the eyes that had looked at her in the doorway of her sister's house; and, last of all, she remembered Chilcote's unaccountable avoidance of the same subject of likeness when she had mentioned it yesterday driving through the Park—and with it his unnecessary eurt repudiation of his former opinions. She reviewed each item, then she raised her head slowly and looked at Loder.

He was prepared for the blow and met it steadily. In the long moment that her eyes searched his face it was she and not he who changed color. She was the first to speak. "You were the man whose hands I saw in the tent," she said. "He made the statement in her usual soft tones, but a slight tremor of excitement underlaid her voice. Goodies, Persian kittens, even crystal gambling-balls, seemed very far away in face of this tangible, fabulous, present interest. "You are not Jack Chilcote," she said, very slowly. "You are wearing his clothes, and speaking in his voice but you are not Jack Chilcote." Her tone quickened with a touch of excitement. "You needn't keep silent and look at me," she said. "I know quite well what I am saying—though I don't understand it, though I have no real proof."

She paused, momentarily disconcerted by her own sudden discovery.

"I don't deny nor admit. My identity is obvious. I can get twenty men to swear to it at any moment. But you like. The fact that I haven't worn rings till now will surely interest them."

"But you do admit—to me, that you are not Jack?"

"I don't deny—and admit nothing. I will offer my congratulations."

"Upon what?"

"The same possession—your imagination."

Lillian stamped her foot. Then, by a quick effort, she conquered her temper. "Prove me to be wrong," she said, with a fresh touch of excitement. "Take off your rings and let me see your hands."

With a deliberate gesture Loder rose and behind his back, "I

THE CHARACTERS! 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. So successful is the deception that the masterful Loder becomes not only the strong politics, lieutenant of

FRANKE, the great party leader, but is not suspected by the servants or by Chilcote's beautiful and unhappy 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 ASTRUPP, close associate of Chilcote, indulging her hobby of crystal-gazing, makes him remove his rings, exposing the give-away scar on his finger. Loder successfully eludes her without explanation. He recognizes her as the woman who had embittered him in a love affair. Next day his fears are submerged by the interest he takes in the political situation growing out of Russia's act in despatching a large force to the seat of the insurrection against the Shah in Persia. He appears as spokesman for his party in Parliament delivering a brilliant address attacking the government's lax policy. He is enjoying the thrill of this political triumph when recalled by Chilcote, who resumes his own life. Chilcote meets Lady Lillian and makes an appointment to dine with her the next day. He forgets all about the appointment and again changes places with Loder, who, noting the date and the phrase "Talk with L' in Chilcote's engagement book, mistakes it for an appointment with

LADY LILLIAN ASTRUPP, who is startled when he is ushered into Lady Astrupp's home and presence instead. She briefly sketches an early love affair and then tells Loder that the man who figured in it turned up the other night at Lady Brantford's party, providing a deep and thrilling mystery.



"Talk with L' he said, without looking around, 'I want your Eve Chilcote in 'The Masquerader.'"

ed by her companion's silent and steady gaze and in the pause a curious and unexpressed thing occurred.

Loder laughed, suddenly—a full, confident, resounding laugh. All the web of the past, the tangled sense of an impossible dream, faded suddenly. He saw his way clearly—and it was Lillian who had opened his eyes.

Lillian, looking at him, hesitated—on the edge of a revelation, which she had almost reached when in his face, and with a calm feature he revealed his hand.

"The greatest charm of woman is her imagination," he said, quietly. "With it I could have no color in life. She would come into me and drop out of it with the same uninteresting color of flesh reality." He paused and smiled again.

At his smile Lillian involuntarily drew back, the color deepening in her cheeks. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

"To lift my head. With each moment I feel more certain of myself. Because that is my attitude," he said. "As a man I admit your imagination, but as a man I fail to follow your reasoning."

"The words and the tone both sting me," she said, smiling. "Do you realize that, whatever your puns are, I can spot them?"

Loder still met her eyes. "I realize nothing of the sort," he said.

"Then you admit that you are not Jack Chilcote?"

"I neither deny nor admit. My identity is obvious. I can get twenty men to swear to it at any moment. But you like. The fact that I haven't worn rings till now will surely interest them."

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it was unknown. In her world people loved or hated, were spiteful or foolish, were even quixotic or dishonorable, but they seldom made scenes. Loder tacitly saw and tacitly accepted this.

Possibly they ate extremely little during the course of the dinner, and talked extraordinarily much on subjects that interested neither; but the main point at least was gained. They dined. The conventionalities were appeased; the silent, watchful servants who waited on them were given no food for comment. The fact that Loder left immediately after dinner, the fact that he paused on the doorstep after the hall door had closed behind him, and drew a long, deep breath of relief, held only an individual significance and therefore did not count.

On reaching Chilcote's home he passed at once to the study and dismissed Greening for the night. But scarcely had he taken advantage of his solitude by settling into an armchair and lighting a cigar, than Frank, displaying an unusual amount of haste and importance, entered the room carrying a letter.

Seeing Loder, he came forward at once. "Mr. Franke's man brought this, sir," he explained. "He was most particular to give it into my hands—making sure I would read it. He's waiting for an answer, sir."

Loder rose and took the letter, a quick thrill of speculation and interest springing across his mind. During his time of banishment he had followed the political situation with feverish attention, inopportunistically chafed by the desire to share in it, apprehensively chilled at the thought of Chilcote's possible behavior. He knew that in the comparatively short interval since Parliament had risen no act of aggression had marked the Russian occupation of Mesopotamia, but he also knew that Franke and his followers looked askance at that great power's audacious attitude, and at sight of his leader's message his intuition stirred.

Turning to the nearest lamp, he tore the envelope open and scanned the letter anxiously. It was written in Franke's own clear, somewhat old-fashioned writing, and opened with a kindly rebuke for his desertion of him since the day of his speech; then immediately, and with elaborate terse clarity, it opened up the subject nearest the writer's mind.

Very slowly and attentively Loder read the letter; and with the extreme quiet that with him invariably covered emotion, he moved to the desk, wrote a note, and handed it to the waiting servant. As the man turned towards the door he called him.

"Renwick," he said, sharply, "when you've given that letter to Mr. Franke's servant, ask Mrs. Chilcote if she can spare me five minutes."

When Renwick had gone and closed the door behind him, Loder paced the room with feverish activity. In one moment the aspect of life had been changed. Five minutes since he had been glorying in the risk of a barely saved situation; now that situation with its merely social complications had become a matter of small importance.

His long, striding steps had carried him to the fireplace, and his back was towards the door when at last the handle turned. He wheeled round to receive Eve's message; then a look of pleased surprise crossed his face. It was Eve herself who stood in the doorway.

Without hesitation his lips parted. "Eve," he said, abruptly, "I have had great news! Russia has shown her teeth at last. Two caravans belonging to a British trader were yesterday interfered with by a band of Cossacks. The affair occurred a couple of miles outside of Mesopotamia; the traders remonstrated, but the Russians made summary use of their advantage. Two Englishmen were wounded and one of them has since died. Franke has only now received the news—which cannot be overrated. It gives the precise lever necessary for the big move of the rearmament." He spoke with great earnestness and unusual haste. As he finished he took a step forward. "But that's not all!" he added. "Franke wants the great move set in motion by a great speech—and he has asked me to make it."

For a moment Eve waited. She looked at him in silence; and in that silence he read in her eyes the reflection of his own expression.

"And you?" she asked, in a suppressed voice. "What answer did you give?"

He watched her for an instant, taking a strange pleasure in her flushed face and brilliantly eager eyes; then the joy of conscious strength, the sense of opportunity regained, swept all other considerations into the opening.

"I accepted," he said, quickly. "Could any man who was merely human have done otherwise?"

That was Loder's attitude and action on the night of his jeopardy and his success, and the following day found his mood unchanged. He was one of those rare individuals who never give a promise overnight and regret it in the morning. He was slow to move, but when he did the movement brushed all obstacles

aside. In the first days of his usurpation he had gone cautiously, half fascinated, half distrustful; then the reality, the extraordinary tangibility of the position had gripped him when, matching himself for the first time with men of his own caliber, he had learned his real weight on the day of his protest against the Easter adjournment. With that knowledge had been born the dominant factor in his whole scheme—the overwhelming, insistent desire to manifest his power. That desire that is the salvation or the ruin of every strong man who has once realized his strength. Supremacy was the note triumphant out. Chilcote's footmarks with his own had been his tact in the first; now it rose paramount. It was the whole theory of creation—the survival of the fittest—the deep, egotistical certainty that he was the better man.

And it was with this conviction that he entered on the vital period of his dual career. The imminent crisis, and his own share in it, absorbed him absolutely. In the weeks that followed his answer to Franke's proposal he gave himself ungrudgingly to his work. He wrote, read, and planned with tireless energy; he frequently forgot to eat, and slept only through sheer exhaustion; in the fullest sense of the word he lived for the culminating hour that was to bring him failure or success.

He seldom left Grosvenor Square in the days that followed, except to confer with his party. All his interest, all his relaxation even, lay in his work and what pertained to it. His strength as like a solid wall, his intelligence was sharp and keen as steel. The moment was his; and by sheer mastery of will he put other considerations out of sight. He forgot Chilcote and forgot Lillian—not because they escaped his memory, but because he chose to shut them from it.

Of Eve he saw but little in this time of high pressure. When a man touches the core of his capacities, he finds his best into the work that in his eyes stands paramount, there is little place for, and no need of, woman. She comes before—and after. She inspires, compensates, or comforts; but the achievement, the creation, is man's alone. And all true women understand and yield to this unspoken precept.

Eve watched the progress of his labor and in the depth of her own heart the watching came nearer to actual living than any activity she had known. She was an onlooker—not an onlooker who stood, as it were, on the steps of the steps, who by a single forward movement, could feel the sand under her feet; the breath of "battle on her face"; and in this time she rested satisfied.

There were hours when Loder seemed scarcely conscious of her existence; but on those occasions she smiled in her serene way—and went on waiting. She knew that each day, before the afternoon had passed, he would come into her sitting room, his face thoughtful, his hands full of books or papers, and dropping into one of the comfortable, studious chairs, would ask laconically for tea.

This was her moment of triumph and recompense—for the very unconsciousness of his coming doubled its value. He would sit for half an hour with a preoccupied glance, or with keen, alert eyes fixed on the fire, while his ideas sorted themselves and fell into line. Sometimes he was silent for the whole half-hour, sometimes he commented to himself he scanned his notes; but on other and rarer occasions he talked, speaking his thoughts and his theories aloud, with the enjoyment of a man who knows himself fully in his depth, while Eve slipped her tea or stretched peacefully at a strip of embroidery.

On these occasions she made a perfect listener. Here and there she encouraged him with an intelligent remark, but she never interrupted. She knew when to be silent and when to speak; when to merge her own individuality and when to make it felt. In these days of stress and preparation he came to her uncomplainingly for rest; he treated her as he might have treated a younger brother—relying on her discretion, turning to her as by right for sympathy, comprehension, and friendship. Sometimes, as they sat silent in the richly colored, homelike room, Eve would pause over her embroidery and let her thoughts spin monuments and let her thoughts spin towards the point where, the brunt of his ordeal passed, he must of necessity seek something beyond mere rest. But there her thoughts would inevitably break off, and the blood flame quickly into her cheek.

Meanwhile Loder worked persistently. With each day that brought the crisis of Franke's scheme nearer, his activity increased—and with it an intensifying of the nervous strain. For if he had his hours of exaltation, he also had his hours of black apprehension. It is all very well to exercise a ghost by sheer strength of will, but one has also to eliminate the idea that gave it existence. Lillian Astrupp, with her unattested evidence and her ephemeral interest, gave him no real uneasiness; but Chilcote and Chilcote's possible summons were matters of grave consequence.

He passed through the hall hurriedly, picking up a hat as he went; and reaching the pavement outside, he went straight forward until Grosvenor Square was left behind; then he ran. At the risk of reputation, at the loss of dignity, he ran until he saw a cab. Halting it, he sprang inside, and as the cabman whipped up and the horse responded to the call, he realized for the first time the full significance of what had occurred.

To be continued.

eration; and there were times when they loomed very dark and sinister. What if at the very moment of sublimation? But invariably he snapped the thread of the supposition and turned with fierce ardor to his work of preparation.

And so the last morning of his probation dawned, and for the first time he breathed freely.

He rose early on the day that was to witness his great effort and dressed slowly. It was a splendid morning; the spirit of the spring seemed embodied in the air, in the pale blue sky, in the shafts of cool sunshine that danced from the mirror to the dressing-table, from the dressing-table to the pictures on the walls of Chilcote's vast room. Inconsequently with its dancing rose a memory of the distant past—a memory of long forgotten days when, as a child, he had been hidden to watch the same sun perform the same fantastic evolutions. The slight and the thought stirred him curiously with an unlooked-for sense of youth. He drew himself together with an added touch of decision as he passed out into the corridor, and as he walked downstairs he whistled a bar or two of an inspiring tune.

In the morning-room Eve was already waiting. She looked up, colored, and smiled as he entered. Her face looked very fresh and young and she wore a gown of the same pale blue that she had worn on his first coming.

She looked up from an open letter as he came into the room, and the sun that fell through the window caught her in a shaft of light, intensifying her blue eyes, her blue gown, and the bunch of violets fastened in her belt. To Loder, still under the influence of early memories, she seemed the embodiment of some youthful ideal—something lost, sought for, and found again. Realization of his feeling for her almost came to him as he stood there looking at her. He hovered about him; it tipped him, as it were, with its wings; then it rose again and soared away. Men like him—men keen to grasp an opening where their careers are concerned, and jealous to hold it when once grasped—are frequently the last to look into their own hearts. He glanced at Eve, he acknowledged the stir of his feeling, but he made no attempt to define his cause. He could no more have given reason for his sensations than he could have told the reason for his own coming downstairs at eight o'clock, he had found her waiting breakfast for him. The time when all such incidents were to stand out, each to a place in his appointed place, had not yet arrived. For the moment his youth had returned to him; he possessed the knowledge of work done, the sense of present companionship in a world of agreeable things; above all, the steady, quiet conviction of his own capacity. All these things came to him in the moment of his entering the room, kneeling Eve, and passing to the breakfast-table; then, while his eyes still rested contentedly on the pleasant array of china and silver, while his senses were still alive to the fresh, earthy scent of Eve's violets, the blow so long dreaded—so slow in coming—fell with accumulated force.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE letter through which the blow fell was not voluminous. It was written on cheap paper in a disguised hand, and the contents covered only half a page. Loder read it slowly, mentally articulating every word; then he laid it down, and as he did so he caught Eve's eyes raised in concern. Again he saw something of his own feelings reflected in her face, and the shock traced him; he picked up the letter, bearing it into strips.

"I must go out," he said, slowly. "I must go now—at once." His voice was hard.

Eve's surprised, concerned eyes still searched his. "Now—? Once?" she repeated. "Now—without breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry." He rose from his seat, and, carrying the slip of paper across the room, dropped them into the fire. He did it, not so much from caution, as from an imperative wish to do something, to move, if only across the room.

Eve's glance followed him. "Is it bad news?" she asked, anxiously. It was unlike her to be insistent, but she was moved to the impulse by the peculiarity of the moment.

"No," he said shortly. "It's—business. This was written yesterday; I should have got it last night."

Her eyes widened. "But nobody does business at eight in the morning," she began, in astonishment; then she suddenly broke off.

Without apology or farewell, Loder had left the fireplace and walked out of the room.

He passed through the hall hurriedly, picking up a hat as he went; and reaching the pavement outside, he went straight forward until Grosvenor Square was left behind; then he ran. At the risk of reputation, at the loss of dignity, he ran until he saw a cab. Halting it, he sprang inside, and as the cabman whipped up and the horse responded to the call, he realized for the first time the full significance of what had occurred.

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