

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

COURTEOUS INSTALLMENT

Chapter XXV—Continued

Passing through the enthusiastic concourse of men, they came unexpectedly upon Fraide and Lady Sarah, surrounded by a group of friends. The old statesman came forward instantly, and taking Loder's arm, walked with him to Chilcote's waiting trolley. He said little as they slowly made their way to the carriage, but the pressure of his fingers was tense and an unwelcome color showed in his face. When Eve and Loder had taken their seats he stepped to the edge of the curb. They were alone for the moment, and leaning close to the carriage, he put his hand through the open window. In silence he took Eve's fingers and held them in a long, affectionate pressure; then he released them and took Loder's hand.

"Goodnight, Chilcote," he said. "You have proved yourself worthy of her, Goodnight. He turned quickly and rejoined his waiting friends. In another second the horses had wheeled about, and Eve and Loder were carried swiftly forward into the darkness.

In the great moments of man's life woman comes before—and after. Some shadow of this truth was in Eve's mind as she lay back in her seat with closed eyes and parted lips. It seemed that life came to her now for the first time—in the glad, proud, satisfying tide of things accomplished. This was her hour; and the recognition of it brought a flush of blood to her face in a sudden, happy rush. There had been no need to precipitate its coming; it had been ordained from the first. Whether she desired it or no, whether she strove to draw it nearer or strove to ward it off, its coming had been inevitable. She opened her eyes suddenly and looked out into the darkness—the darkness throbbing with multitudes of lives, all awaiting, all dealing fulfillment. She was no longer lonely, no longer lost; she was kin with all this pitiful, admirable, shining, loving humanity. Again tears of pride and happiness filled her eyes. Then suddenly she thought she had waited for come to pass.

Loder leaned close to her. She was conscious of his nearer presence, of his strong, masterful personality. With a thrill that caught her breath, she felt his arm about her shoulder and heard the sound of his voice.

"Eve," he said, "I love you. Do you understand? I love you. And drawing her close to him he bent and kissed her.

With Loder, to love was to love fully. When he gave, he gave generously; when he swept aside a barrier he left no stone standing. He had been slow to recognize his capacities—slower still to recognize his feelings. But now that the knowledge came he received it openly. In this matter of newly comprehended love he gave no thought to either past or future. That they loved and were alone was all he knew or questioned. She was as much Eve—the one woman—as though they were together in the primeval garden; and in that spirit he claimed her.

He neither spoke nor behaved extravagantly in that great moment of comprehension. He acted quietly, with the completeness of purpose that he gave to everything. He had found a new equality within himself, and he was strong enough to dread no weakness in displaying it.

Holding her close to him, he repeated his declaration again and again, as though repetition ratified it. He found no need to question her feeling for him—he had divined it in a flash of inspiration as she stood waiting in the doorway of the gallery; but his own surrender was a different matter.

As the carriage passed round the corner of Whitehall and dipped into the traffic of Piccadilly he bent down again until her soft hair brushed his face; and the warm personal contact, the slight, fresh smell of violets so suggestive of her presence, stirred him anew.

"Eve," he said, vehemently, "do you understand? Do you know that I have loved you always—from the very first?" As he said it he bent still nearer, kissing her lips, her forehead, her hair.

At the same moment the horses slackened speed and then stopped, arrested by one of the temporary blocks that so often occur in the traffic of Piccadilly Circus.

Loder, preoccupied with his own feelings, scarcely noticed the halt, but Eve drew away from him languidly.

"You mustn't," she said, softly, "look!"

The carriage had stopped beside one of the small islands that intersect the place; a group of pedestrians were crowded upon it, under the light of the electric lamp—wayfarers who, like themselves, were awaiting a passage. Loder took a cursory glance at them, then turned back to Eve.

"What are they, after all, but men and women?" he said. "They'd understand—every one of them." He glanced in his turn; nevertheless he withdrew his arm. Her feminine thought for conventionalities appealed to him. It was an acknowledgment of dependency.

For a while they sat silent, the light of the street lamp flickering through the glass of the window, the hum of voices and traffic coming to

them in a continuous rise and fall of sound. At first the position was interesting; but, as the seconds followed each other, it gradually became irksome. Loder, watching the varying expressions of Eve's face, grew impatient of the delay, grew suddenly eager to be alone in the fragrant darkness.

Impelled by the desire, he leaned forward and opened the window.

"Let's find the meaning of this," he said. "Is there nobody to regulate the traffic?" As he spoke he half rose and leaned out of the window. There was a touch of impatient annoyance in his manner. From the realization of power, there was something irksome in this commonplace check to his desires.

"Isn't it possible to get out of this?" Eve heard him call to the coachman. Then she heard no more.

He had leaned out of the carriage with the intention of looking toward the cause of the delay; instead, by that magnetic attraction that, undoubtedly exists, he looked directly in front of him at the group of people waiting on the little island—at one man who leaned against the lamp-post in an attitude of apathy—a man with a pallid, unshaven face and lustreless eyes, who wore a cap drawn low over his forehead.

He looked at this man, and the man saw and returned his glance. For a space that seemed interminable they held each other's eyes; then very slowly Loder drew back into the carriage.

As he dropped into his seat Eve glanced at him anxiously.

"John," she said, "has anything happened? You look ill."

He turned to her and tried to smile.

"It's nothing," he said. "Nothing to worry about." He spoke quickly, but his voice had suddenly become flat. All the command, all the domination had dropped away from it.

Eve bent close to him, her face lighting up with anxious tenderness. "It was the excitement," she said. "The strain of tonight."

He looked at her, but he made no attempt to press the fingers that clasped his own.

"Yes," he said, slowly. "Yes. It was the excitement of tonight—and the reaction."

CHAPTER XXVI

The next morning at eight o'clock, and again without breakfast, Loder crossed the distance between Grosvenor Square and Clifford's Inn. He left Chilcote's house hastily, with a haste that only an urgent motive could have driven him to adopt. His steps were quick and uneven as he traversed the intervening streets; his shoulders lacked their decisive pose, and his pale face was marked with shadows beneath the eyes—shadows that bore witness to the sleepless night spent in pacing Chilcote's vast and lonely room. By the curious effect of circumstances the likeness between the two men had never been more significantly marked than on that morning of April 19th, when Loder walked along the pavements crowded with early workers and brisk with insistent news-vendors already alive to the value of last night's political crisis.

The irony of this last element in the day's concerns came to him fully when some newsboy more energetic than his fellows thrust a paper in front of him.

"See, see," he called, "the 'Opposition' speech by Mr. Chilcote! Government defeat!"

For a moment Loder stopped and his face reddened. The title of emotion ran strong. His hand went instinctively to his pocket; then his lips set. He shook his head and walked on.

With the same hard expression about his mouth, he turned into Clifford's Inn, passed through his own doorway, and mounted the stairs.

This time there was no milk-can on the threshold of his rooms and the door yielded to his pressure without the need of a key. With a strange sensation of reluctance he walked into the narrow passage and passed uncertainly which room to enter first. As he stood hesitating a voice from the sitting-room settled the question.

"Who's there?" It called, irritably. "What do you want?"

Without further ceremony the intruder pushed the door open and entered the room. As he did so he drew a quick breath—whether of the appointment or relief it was impossible to say. Whether he had hoped for or dreaded it, Chilcote was conscious.

As Loder entered he was sitting by the cheerful grate, the ashes of yesterday's fire showing charred and dreary where the sun touched them. His back was to the light, and about his shoulders was an old plaid rug. Behind him on the table stood a cup, a teapot, and the can of milk; before him a bottle was set to hold upon a tray a spirit-stove.

In all strong situations we are more or less common-place. Loder's first remark as he glanced round the disordered room seemed strangely inefficient.

"Where's Robins?" he asked, in a brusque voice. His mind teemed with big considerations, yet this was his first involuntary question.

Chilcote had started at the entrance of his visitor; now he sat staring at him, his hands avoiding the arms of his chair.

THE CHARACTERS IN THE STORY

JOHN CHILCOTE, member of the House of Commons, a party to a loveless marriage and a 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 political ally of

FRAIDE, the great party leader, but he is not suspected by the servants nor 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 ASTRUPP, intimate of Chilcote, indulging her hobby of crystal-gazing, makes him remove his rings, exposing the give-away scar on his finger. Loder, recognizing her as the woman who had jilted him in an old love affair, eludes her without explanation. Loder is recalled by Chilcote, who resumes his own life. Chilcote meets Lady Lillian and makes an appointment to dine with her next day. He forgets the appointment and again changes places with Loder, who, noting the date and phrase "Talk with L' in Chilcote's engagement book mistakes it for a political appointment with

LAKELY, publisher of St. George's. Loder is startled when he is ushered into Lady Astrupp's home and presence instead. She becomes suspicious, asks him to remove his rings and he refuses. She declares he is not Chilcote. He neither denies nor affirms, but warns her before leaving that none will believe her story. Russian acts of aggression against British trading interests in Persia occupy his attention and he is delegated by his party to make a great speech attacking the government policy. News of the killing of a British consul-general in Persia, comes at the psychological moment and fires Loder in the making of a speech urging immediate government action that is epochal. He is the hero of the hour and there are tears of joy in the eyes of the unsuspecting Eve, Chilcote as she leaves the gallery with Loder.



"Chilcote," he said, very quietly, "I've come to tell you that the thing must end." [Guy Bates Post as John Chilcote and John Loder in "The Masquerader"]

"Where's Robins?" Loder asked him about him was to some extent disheveled. Still moving slowly, Loder went toward him, and, relieving him of the empty cup, stood looking down at him.

"Chilcote," he said, very quietly, "I've come to tell you that the thing must end."

After he spoke there was a prolonged pause; then, as if shaken with sudden consciousness, Chilcote rose. The rug dropped from one shoulder and hung down ludicrously; his hand caught the back of the chair for support; his unshaven face looked abashed and repulsive in its sudden expression of fear and anxiety. Loder voluntarily turned away.

"I mean it," he said, slowly. "It's over, we've come to the end."

"But why?" Chilcote articulated, blankly. "Why? Why?" In his confusion he could not think of no better word.

"Because I threw it up. My side of the bargain's off!"

Again Chilcote's lips parted stammeringly. The quality caused by physical exhaustion and his recently admitted drug was passing from him, the hopelessly shattered condition of mind and body was showing again. The tea ready, he poured it into the cup and carried it across the room.

"Drink this," he said, hesitantly. "The fire will be up presently."

Chilcote extended a cold and stony hand. "You see," he began.

But Loder checked him almost savagely. "I do—as well as though I had followed you from Piccadilly last night! You've been hanging about. God knows where, till the small hours of the morning; then you've come back—stunk back, starting for your damned poison and shivering with cold. You've settled the first part of the business, but the odd has still to be reckoned with. Drink the tea. I've something to say to you."

He mastered his embarrassment, and, walking to the window, stood looking down into the court. His eyes were blank, his face hard; his ears heard nothing but the faint sound of Chilcote's swallowing the click of the cup against his teeth.

For a time that seemed interminable he stood motionless; then, when he judged the tea finished, he turned slowly. Chilcote had drawn closer to the fire. He was obviously braced by the warmth; and the apathy that

stopped; and because— Abruptly he stopped. The thing he had come to say—the thing he had meant to say—would not be said. Either his tongue or his resolution failed him, and for the instant he stood as silent and almost as ill at ease as his companion. Then all at once inspiration came to him, in the suggestion of a well-thought-for argument by which he might influence Chilcote and save his own self-respect. "It's all over, Chilcote," he said, more quietly. "It has run itself out. And in a dozen sentences he sketched the story of Lillian Astrupp—her past relations with himself, her present suspicions. It was not what he had meant to say; it was not what he had come to say; but it served the purpose—it saved him humiliation.

Chilcote listened to the last word; then, as the other finished, he dropped nervously back into his chair. "Good heavens! man," he said, "why didn't you tell me—why didn't you warn me, instead of filling my mind with your political position? Your political position!" He laughed unsteadily. The long spells of intolerance that had weakened his already maimed faculties showed in the laugh, in the sudden breaking of his voice. "You must do something, Loder!" he added, nervously, checking his amusement; "you must do something!"

Loder looked down at him. "No," he said, decisively. "It's your turn now. It's you who's got to do something."

Chilcote's face turned a shade grayer. "I can't," he said, below his breath.

"Can't? Oh, yes, you can. We can all do anything. It's not too late; there's still sufficient time, Chilcote," he added, suddenly, "don't you see that the thing has been madness all along—has been like playing with the most infernal explosives? You may think whatever you have faith in that nobody has been smashed up! You are going back. Do you understand me? You are going back—now, today, before it's too late. There was a great change in Loder; his strong, imperious face was stirred; he was moved in both voice and manner. Time after time he repeated his injunction—reasoning, expostulating, insisting. It almost seemed that he fought some strenuous invisible force rather than the shattered man before him.

Chilcote moved nervously in his seat. It was the first real clash of personalities. He felt it—recognized it by instinct. The sense of domination had fallen on him; he knew himself impotent in the other's hands. Whatever he might attempt in moments of solitude, he possessed no voice in presence of this invincible second self. For a while he struggled—he did not fight, he struggled to resist—then, lifting his eyes, he met Loder's. "And what will you do?" he said, weakly.

Loder returned his questioning gaze; but almost immediately he turned aside. "Oh," he said, "I shall leave London."

CHAPTER XXVII

BUT Loder did not leave London. And the hour of two on the day following his dismissal of Chilcote found him again in his sitting-room.

He sat at the center-table surrounded by a cloud of smoke; a pipe was between his lips and the morning's newspapers lay in a heap beside his elbow. To the student of humanity his attitude was intensely interesting. It was the attitude of a man trampled by the knowledge of his strength. Before him, as he sat smoking, stretched a future of absolute nothingness; and towards this blank future a struggling and as yet scarcely sentient portion of his consciousness—a struggling and as yet scarcely sentient portion—pushed him inevitably; while another—a vigorous, persistent, human portion—cried to him to pause. So actual, so clamorous was this silent mental combat that had raged unceasingly since the moment of his renunciation that at last in physical response to it he pushed back his chair.

"It's too late!" he said, aloud.

"Then a fool. It's too late."

Then abruptly, astonishingly, as though in direct response to his spoken thought, the door opened and Chilcote walked into the room.

Slowly Loder rose and stared at him. The feeling he acknowledged to himself was anger; but below the anger a very different sensation ran riotously strong. And it was in time to this second feeling, this sudden, lawless joy, that his pulses beat as he turned a cold face on the intruder.

"Well?" he said, sternly.

But Chilcote was impervious to sternness. He was mentally shaken and distressed, though outwardly irreproachable, even to the violets in the lapel of his coat—the violets that for a week past had been brought each morning to the door of Loder's rooms by Eve's maid. For one second, as Loder's eyes rested on the flowers, a sting of ungovernable jealousy shot through him; then as suddenly it died away, superseded by another feeling—a feeling of new, spontaneous joy. Worn by Chilcote or by himself, the flowers were a symbol!

"Well?" he said again, in a gentler voice.

Chilcote had walked to the table

and laid down his hat. His face was white and the muscles of his lips twitched nervously as he drew off his gloves.

"Thank Heaven, you're here!" he said, shortly. "Give me something to drink."

In silence Loder brought out the whiskey and set it on the table; then instinctively he turned aside. As plainly as though he saw the action, he mentally figured Chilcote's furtive glance, the furtive movement of his fingers to his waistcoat-pocket, the hasty dropping of the tabbies into the glass. For an instant the sense of his tacit connivance came to him sharply; the next, he flung it from him. The human, inner voice was whispering his old watchword. The strong man has no time to waste over his weaker brother!

When he heard Chilcote lay down his tumbler he looked back again. "Well, what is it?" he said. "What have you come for?" He strove resolutely to keep his voice severe, but try as he might, he could not quite subdue the eager force that lay behind his words. Once again, as on the night of their second interchange, life had become a phoenix, rising to fresh existence even while he sifted its ashes. "Well?" he said, once again.

Chilcote had set down his glass. He was nervously passing his handkerchief across his lips. There was something in the gesture that attracted Loder. Looking at him more attentively, he saw what his own feelings and the other's conventional dress had blinded him to—the almost piteous panic and excitement in his visitor's eyes.

"Something's gone wrong?" he said, with abrupt intonation.

Chilcote started. "Yes—no—that is, yes," he stammered.

Loder moved round the table. "Something's gone wrong," he repeated. "And you've come to tell me."

The tone unnerved Chilcote; he suddenly dropped into a chair. "It wasn't my fault," he began. "I—I have had a horrible time."

Loder's lips tightened. "Yes," he said, "yes—I understand."

The other glanced up with a gleam of his old suspicion. "Twas all my nerves, Loder—"

"Of course. Yes, of course," Loder's interruption was curt.

Chilcote eyed him doubtfully. Then recollection took the place of doubt, and a change passed over his expression. It wasn't my fault," he began, hastily. "On my soul, it wasn't! It was Crapham's beastly fault for showing her into the morning-room—"

Loder kept silent. His curiosity had flared into sudden life at the other's words, but he feared to break the shattered train of thought even by a word.

In the silence Chilcote moved unsteadily. "You see," he went on, at last, "when I was here with you—I felt strong. I—I— I stopped. Yes, yes. When you were here with me you felt strong."

"Yes, that's it. While I was here, I felt I could do the thing. But when I went home—when I went up to my rooms—"

Again he paused, passing his handkerchief over his forehead.

"When I went up to your rooms?" Loder strove hard to keep his control.

"To my room? Oh, I—I forgot about that. I forgot about the night—"

He hesitated, confusedly. "All I remember—the coming down to breakfast next morning this morning—at twelve o'clock—"

Loder turned to the table and poured himself out some whiskey. "Yes," he acquiesced in a very quiet voice.

At the word Chilcote rose from his seat. His disquietude was very evident. "Oh, there was breakfast on the table when I came down—breakfast with flowers and a horrible, dazzling glare of sun. It was then, Loder, as I stood and looked into the room, that the impossibility of it all came to me—that I knew I couldn't stand it—couldn't go on."

Loder swallowed his whiskey slowly. His sense of overpowering curiosity held him very still; but he made no effort to prompt his companion.

Again Chilcote shifted his position agitatedly. "It had to be done," he said, dispiritedly. "I had to do it—then and there. The things were on the bureau—the pens and ink and telegraph forms. They tempted me."

Loder laid down his glass suddenly. An exclamation rose to his lips, but he checked it.

At the slight sound of the tumbler touching the table Chilcote turned; but there was no expression on the other's face to frighten him.

"They tempted me," he repeated, hastily. "They seemed like magnets—they seemed to draw me towards them. I sat at the bureau staring at them for a long time; then a terrible compulsion seized me—something you could never understand—and I caught up the nearest pen and wrote just what was in my mind. It wasn't a telegram, properly speaking—it was more a letter. I wanted you back and I had to make myself plain. The writing of the message seemed to steady me; the mere forming of the words quieted my mind. I was almost cool when I got up from the bureau and pressed the bell—"

"The bell?"

"Yes. I rang for a servant. I had

to send the wire myself, so I had to get a cab." His voice rose to irritability. "I pressed the bell several times; but the thing had gone wrong—'twouldn't work. At last I gave it up and went into the corridor to call some one."

"Well?" In the intense suspense of the moment the word escaped Loder.

"Oh, I went out of the room, but there at the door, before I could call anybody, I knocked up against that idiot Greening. He was looking for me—for you, rather—about some beastly Wark affair. I tried to explain that I wasn't in a state for business; I tried to shake him off, but he was worse than Hissington! At last, to be rid of the fellow, I went with him to the study—"

"But the telegram?" Loder began; then again he checked himself. "Yes—yes—I understand," he added, quietly.

"I'm getting to the telegram! I wish you wouldn't jar me with such questions. I wasn't in the study more than a minute—more than five or six minutes—"

His voice became confused; the strain of the concerted recital was telling upon him. With nervous haste he made a rush for the end of his story. "I wasn't more than seven or eight minutes in the study; then, as I came down-stairs, Crapham met me in the hall. He called me and wished to see me. And that he had shown her into the morning-room—"

"The morning-room?" Loder suddenly stopped back from the table. "The morning-room? With your telegram lying on the bureau?"

His sudden speech and movement startled Chilcote. The blood rushed to his face, then died out, leaving it ashen. "Don't do that, Loder!" he cried. "I—I can't bear it."

With an immense effort Loder controlled himself. "Sorry!" he said. "Go on."

"I'm going on! I tell you I'm going on. I got a horrid shock when Crapham told me. Your story came clattering through my mind. I knew Lillian had come to see you—I knew there was going to be a scene—"

"But the telegram? The telegram?"

Chilcote paid no heed to the interruption. He was following his own train of ideas. "I knew she had come to see you—I knew there was going to be a scene. When I got to the morning-room my hand was shaking as I took the telegram out of my pocket. I could have cried out with relief. My was there as well!"

"Yes?"

"Yes, I don't think I was ever so glad to see her in my life." He laughed almost hysterically. "I was quite civil to her, and she was—quite sweet to me—"

Again he laughed. Loder's lips tightened.

"You see, it saved the situation. Even if Lillian wanted to be nasty, she couldn't, while Eve was there. We talked for about ten minutes. We were quite an amiable trio. Then Lillian told me why she'd called. She wanted me to make a fourth in a theatre party at the 'Arcadian' to-night, and I—I was so pleased and so relieved that I said yes. He paused and laughed again unsteadily.

In his tense anxiety, Loder ground his heel into the floor. "That's all," he said, bitterly. "Go on."

"Don't!" Chilcote exclaimed. "I'm going on—I'm going on." He passed his handkerchief across his lips. "We talked for ten minutes or so, and then Lillian left. I went with her to the hall door, but Crapham was there—so I was still stiff. She laughed and chattered and seemed in high spirits as we crossed the hall, and she was still smiling as she went to me from her mirror. But then, Loder—then, as I stood in the hall, it all came to me suddenly. I remembered that Lillian must have been alone in the morning-room before I had found her! I remembered the telegram! I ran back to the room, meaning to question Eve as to how long Lillian had been alone; but she had left the room. I ran to the bureau—but the telegram wasn't there."

"Yes, gone. That's why I've come straight here."

For a moment they confronted each other. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, Loder pushed Chilcote aside and crossed the room. An instant later the opening and shutting of doors, the hasty pulling out of drawers and moving of boxes, came from the bedroom.

Chilcote, shaken and nervous, stood for a minute where his companion had left him; at last, impelled by curiosity, he too crossed the narrow passage and entered the second room.

The full light streamed in through the open window; the keen spring air blew freshly across the house-tops; and on the window-sill a band of grimy, joyous sparrows twittered and preened themselves. In the middle of the room stood Loder. His coat was off, and round him on chairs and floor lay an array of waistcoats, gloves, and ties.

For a space Chilcote stood in the doorway staring at him; then his lips parted and he took a step forward. "Loder—" he said anxiously. "Loder, what are you going to do?"

Loder turned. His shoulders were stiff, his face alight with energy. "I'm going back," he said, "to unravel the tangle you have made."

To be continued.