

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

FIFTEENTH INSTALLMENT CHAPTER XXVIII

Loder's plan of action was arrived at before he reached Trafalgar Square. The facts of the case were simple. Chilcote had left an incriminating telegram on the bureau in the morning room at Grosvenor Square; by an unlikely chance Lillian Astrupp had been shown up into that room, where she had remained alone until the moment that Eve, either by request or by accident, had found her there. The facts resolved themselves into one question. What use had Lillian made of those solitary moments? Without declaration, Loder's mind turned towards one answer. Lillian was not the woman to lose an opportunity, whether the space at her command were long or short. True, Eve too had been alone in the room, while Chilcote had accompanied Lillian to the door; but of this he made small account. Eve had been there, but Lillian had been there first. Judging by precedent, by personal character, by all human probability, it was not to be supposed that anything would have been left for the second-comer. So convinced was he that, reaching Trafalgar Square, he stopped and hailed a hansom.

"Cadogan Gardens," he called. "No. 33."

The moments seemed very few before the cab drew up beside the curb and he caught his second glimpse of the enamelled door with its silver fittings. The white and silver gleamed in the sunshine; banks of cream-colored hydrangeas clustered on the window-sills, filling the clear air with a warm and fragrant scent. With that strange sensation of having lived through the scene before, Loder left the cab and walked up the steps. Instantly he pressed the bell the door was opened by Lillian's discreet, deferential maid servant.

"Is Lady Astrupp at home?" he asked.

The man looked thoughtful. "Her ladyship lunched at home, sir—"

But Loder interrupted him. "Ask her to see me," he said lamely.

The servant expressed no surprise. His only comment was to throw the door wide.

"If you'll wait in the white room, sir," he said, "I'll inform her ladyship." Chilcote was evidently a frequent and favored visitor.

In this manner Loder for the second time entered the house so unfamiliar—and yet so familiar in all that it suggested. Entering the drawing-room, he had leisure to look about him. It was a beautiful room, large and lofty; luxury was evident on every hand, but it was not the luxury that pulls or offends. Each object was graceful and possessed its own intrinsic value. The atmosphere was too delicate to appeal to him, but he acknowledged the taste and artistic delicacy it conveyed. Almost at the moment of acknowledgment the door opened to admit Lillian.

She wore the same gown of pale-colored cloth, warmed and softened by rich furs, that she had worn on the day she and Chilcote had driven in the park. She was drawing on her gloves as she came into the room; and pausing near the door, she looked across at Loder and laughed in her slow, amused way.

"I thought it would be you," she said languidly.

Loder came forward. "You expected me?" he said abruptly. A sudden contraction filled his face that it was not the welcome of her eyes, but something at once subtle and more definite that prompted her recognition of him.

She smiled. "Why should I expect you? On the contrary, I'm waiting to know who you are here?"

He was silent for an instant; then he proceeded in her own light tone.

"As for as that goes," he said, "I'll make it my duty to call—having dined with you. I'm an old-fashioned person."

For a full second she surveyed him unseeingly; then at last she spoke.

"My dear Jack," she said, "I never thought you would be here. I should have thought you would have been more at home."

Loder felt disconcerted and annoyed. Either, like himself, she was fishing for information, or she was deliberately playing with him. In his perplexity he glanced across the room towards the fireplace.

Lillian saw the look. "Won't you sit down?" she said, indicating the chair. "I promise not to make you smoke. I shan't even ask you to take off your gloves."

Loder made no movement. His mind was unpleasantly upset. It was nearly a fortnight since he had seen Lillian, and in the interval her attitude had changed, and the change puzzled him. It might mean the possibility of a woman who, knowing herself without adequate weapons, withdraws from a combat that has proved fruitless; or it might imply the merely caustic desire to toy with a certain. He looked quickly at the delicate face, the green eyes somewhat obliquely set, the unobtainable mouth; and instantly he inclined to the latter theory. The conviction that she possessed the telegram filled him suddenly, and with it came the desire to put his belief to the test; he knew beyond question whether he was dealing with a woman who was capable of such a deed.

"When you first came into the room," he said, "you said, 'I thought it would be you.' Why did you say that?"

Again she smiled—the smile that might be malicious or might be merely amused. "Oh," she answered at last, "I only meant that though I had been told Jack Chilcote wanted me, it wasn't Jack Chilcote I expected to see!"

After her statement there was a pause. Loder's position was difficult. Instinctively convinced that, strong in the possession of her proof, she was enjoying his tantalized discomfort, he yet craved the actual evidence that should set his suspicions to rest. Acting upon the desire, he made a new beginning.

"Do you know why I came?" he asked.

Lillian looked up innocently. "It's so hard to be certain of anything in this world," she said. "But one is always at liberty to guess."

Again he was perplexed. Her attitude was not quite the attitude of one who controls the game, and yet—

He looked at her with a puzzled scrutiny. Women for him had always spelled the incomprehensible; he was at his best, his strongest, his suriest in the presence of men. Feeling his disadvantage, yet determined to gain his end, he made a last attempt.

"How did you amuse yourself at Grosvenor Square this morning before Eve came to see you?" he asked. The effort was not a success, but it was direct.

Lillian was looking at her gloves. She did not raise her eyes as he spoke, but her fingers moved in their task. For a second she remained motionless, then she looked up slowly.

"Oh," she said, sweetly, "so I was right in my guess? You did come to find out whether I sat in the morning-room with my hands in my lap—or wandered about in search of entertainment?"

Loder colored with annoyance and apprehension. Every look, every tone of Lillian's was distasteful to him. No microscope could have revealed her more fully to him than did his own eyesight. But it was not the question for personal antipathy; there were other interests than his own at stake. With new resolution he returned her glance.

"Then I must still ask my first question, why did you say, 'I thought it would be you'?" His gaze was direct—so direct that it disconcerted her. She laughed a little modestly.

"Because I knew."

"How did you know?"

"Because—" she began; then again she laughed. "Because," she added, quickly, "as I moved by a fresh glimpse, 'Jack Chilcote' made it very obvious to any one who was in his morning-room at twelve o'clock today that it would be you and not he who would be found sitting in his place this afternoon! It's all very well to talk about honor, but when one walks into an empty room and sees a telegram as long as a letter open on a bureau—"

But her sentence was never finished. Loder had heard what he came to hear; any further she might offer was of no moment in his eyes.

"My dear girl," he broke in, abruptly, "don't trouble! I should make a most ungrateful, father-confounding" He spoke quickly. His color was still high, but not of annoyance. His suspense was transformed into unpleasant certainty; but the exchange left him sure of himself. His perplexity had dropped to a quiet sense of self-reliance; his ornamental desire was for solitude in which to prepare for the task that lay before him; the most congenial task the world possessed—the unraveling of Chilcote's tangled skein.

Looking into Lillian's eyes, he smiled. "Goodbye," he said, holding out his hand. "I think we've finished—for today."

She slowly extended her fingers. Her expression and attitude were slightly puzzled—a puzzlement that was either spontaneous or singularly well assumed. As their hands touched she smiled again.

"Will you drop in at the 'Arcadian' tonight?" she said. "It's the dramatized version of 'Other Men's Shoes.' The temptation to make you see it was too irresistible—as you know."

"There was a man," she said, "who waited for his answer—her head inclined to one side, her green eyes gleaming. Loder, conscious of her regard, hesitated for a moment. Then his face cleared. "Right," he said, slowly. "The 'Arcadian' tonight!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

Loder's frame of mind as he left Cadogan Gardens was peculiar. Once more he was living in the present—the fearful, exhilarating present, and the knowledge thereof him. Upon one point his mind was satisfied. Lillian Astrupp had found the telegram, and it remained to him to render her full valueless. How he proposed to do this, how he proposed to come out triumphant in face of such a situation was a matter that, as yet was shapeless in his mind; nevertheless, the danger—the sense of impending conflict—had a saving effect after the inaction of the day and night just passed. Chilcote in his weakness and his entanglement had turned to him; and he in his strength and capacity had responded to the appeal.

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, 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 but 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, 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 killed him in the past, eludes her without explanation. Loder is recalled by Chilcote, who resumes his own life. Chilcote makes an appointment to dine with Lady Lillian. He forgets the appointment and again changes places with Loder, who, noting the date and the initial "L" in Chilcote's engagement book, mistakes it for a political appointment with

LAKELY, editor of St. George's. Loder is startled when he is ushered into the home and presence of Lady Astrupp. She asks him to remove his rings. 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 give Loder his great political opportunity. News of the assassination of a British consul-general fires him to an epochal speech in Parliament that overturns the cabinet. He is the hero of the hour and there are tears of joy in Eve's eyes. Realizing that he loves her he goes back to Chilcote and announces that he intends to quit the masquerade. The wretched Chilcote leaves for home, but he is not gone for long. He returns to Loder with the news that an incriminating telegram he had written Loder imploring him to resume the deception disappeared after a visit by Lady Astrupp. Loder determines to unravel the tangle.



Chilcote eyed him doubtfully. [Guy Bates Post in "The Masquerader."]

His step was firm and his bearing seemed as if he were a man of the world. He walked towards the familiar home.

The habit of self-reliance is as sedulous and tenacious as any vice. For one moment on the night of his great speech, as he leaned out of Chilcote's carriage and met Chilcote's eyes, Loder had seen himself—and awoke the shock of revelation had taken decisive action. But in the hours subsequent to that action the pliant, inner voice had which, perched unobtrusively, sounding his cowardly self-esteem, had been stung to stone by the tempest of his own conviction; and his own self-reliance, his own pride, his own sense of honor, had burst into his consciousness, ready to plead or to despair, he had found no need for either coercion or entreaty. By a power more subtle and effective than any at his command, Loder had been prepared for his coming—unconsciously ready with an apprehension before his appeal had been made. It was the fruit of this preparation, the inevitable outcome of it, that strengthened his step and stilled his hand as he mounted the steps, and opened the hall door of Chilcote's house on that evening afternoon.

The dignity, the air of quiet self-reliance, impressed him as it never failed to do, as he crossed the large hall and ascended the stairs—the same stairs that he had passed down almost as an outcast not so many hours before. He was filled with the sense of things regained; better in his own star lifted him as it had done a hundred times before in those same surroundings.

He quickened his steps as the apartment came to him. Then, receiving the lead of the stairs, he turned directly towards Eve's sitting-room.

He was surprised. Remembering their last passionate scene, and the danger Chilcote's subsequent presence must inevitably have called upon it, he had expected to be doubtfully received; but the reality of the reception left him bewildered. Eve's manner was not that of the ill-used wife; its vehemence, its note of desire and deprecation, was more suggestive of his own recent seizing of the present, an distinguished from past or future. With an odd sense of confusion he turned to her at last.

"Then I am forgiven?" he said. And unconsciously, as he moved nearer, he touched her arm.

At his touch she started. All the yielding sweetness, the submission, that had marked her two nights ago was gone; in its place she was possessed by a curious excitement that stirred, while it perplexed.

Loder, moved by the sensation, took another step forward. "Then I am forgiven?" he repeated, more softly.

Her face was averted as he spoke, but he felt her arm quiver; and when at last she lifted her head, their eyes met. Neither spoke, but in an instant Loder's arms were round her.

For a long, silent space they stood holding each other closely. Then, with a sharp movement, Eve freed herself. Her color was still high, her eyes still peculiarly bright, but the bunch of violets she had worn in her hair had fallen to the ground.

"John—" she said, quickly; but on the word her breath caught. With a touch of nervousness she stooped to pick up the flowers.

Loder noticed both voice and gesture. "What is it?" he said. "What were you going to say?"

But she made no answer. For a second longer she searched for the violets; then, as he bent to assist her, she stood up quickly and laughed—a short, embarrassed laugh.

"How absurd and nervous I must be!" she exclaimed. "Like a schoolgirl instead of a woman of twenty-four, you must help me to be sensible!" Her cheeks still burned, her manner was still excited, like one who holds an emotion or an impulse at bay.

Loder looked at her uncertainly. "Eve—" he began, but she cut him off, characteristically perseverant, but she instantly checked him. There was a faint, a faint suggestion of fear, in her protest.

"Don't!" she said. "Don't! I don't want explanations. I want to—enjoy the moment without having things analyzed or smoothed away. Can't you understand? Can't you see that I'm wonderfully, terribly happy to—to have you—as you are!" Again her voice broke—a break that might have been a laugh or a sob.

The sound was an emotional crisis, as such a sound invariably is. It arrested and steadied her. For a moment she stood absolutely still; then, with something very closely resembling her old repose of manner, she stooped again and quietly picked up the flowers still lying at her feet.

"Now," she said, quietly, "I must say what I've wanted to say all along. How does it feel to be a great man? Her manner was controlled, she looked at him evenly and directly; saw for the faint vibration in her voice there was nothing to indicate the tumult of a moment ago.

But Loder was still uncertain. He caught her hand, his eyes searching hers.

"But Eve—" he began. Then Eve played the last card in her mysterious game. Laughing quickly and nervously, she freed her hand and laid it over his mouth.

"No!" she said. "Not one word! All this past fortnight has belonged to you; now it's my turn. Today is mine!"

CHAPTER XXX.

AND so, once again, the woman conquered. Whatever Eve's intentions were, whatever she wished to create or ward off, she was successful in gaining her end. For more than two hours she kept Loder at her side. Those two hours were moments in those two hours when the tension was high, when the efforts she made to interest and hold him were somewhat strained. But it was in the last hour that she

of the two persons concerned; for it was long after tea had been served, long after Eve had offered to do penance for her monopoly of him by diving him to Chilcote's club, that Loder realized with any degree of distinctness that it was she and not he who had taken the lead in their interview; that it was she and not he who had bridged the difficult silences and given a fresh direction to dangerous channels of talk. It was long before he recognized this; but it was still longer before he realized the far more potent fact that, without any coldness, without any lessening of the subtle consideration she always showed him, she had given him no further opportunity of making love.

Talking continuously, elated with the sense of conflict still to come, he drove with her to the club. Considering that drive in the light of after events, his own frame of mind invariably filled him with incredulity. In the eyes of any sane man his position was not worth an hour's purchase; yet in the blind self-confidence of the moment he would not have changed places with Fraide himself. The great, strong of Self was sounding in his ears as he drove through the crowded streets, conscious of the cool, crisp air, of Eve's close presence, of the numberless infinitesimal things that went to make up the value of life. It was this acknowledgment of personality that upheld him; the personality, the power that had carried him unswervingly through eleven aimless years; that had impelled him towards this new career when the new career had first been opened to him; that had been away to this fresh existence against all odds. The indomitable I, that had trampled on Chilcote's footmarks in public life, in private life—in love. It was a triumphant poem that danced in his ears, something persistent and prophetic with an undernote of menace. The cry of the human soul that has dared to stand alone.

His glance was keen and bright as he waited for a moment at the carriage door and took Eve's hand before entering the club.

"You're dining out tonight?" he said. His fingers, always tenacious and masterful, continued to hold hers. The communion that had driven him temporarily towards sacrifice had passed. His pride, his confidence, and with them his sense, had flowed back in full measure.

Eve, watching him attentively, smiled a little. "Yes," she said, "I'm dining with the Beauclairs."

"What time will you get home?" he asked. "I shall be home at eleven," she said below her breath.

Loder looked at her with interest. "It is a good play," she responded. "I like it better than the book. You've read the book, of course?"

"No," Loder tried hard to fix his thoughts.

"It's amusing—but far-fetched," he said. "Indeed?" He picked up the program lying on the edge of the box. His ears were strained to catch the tone of Lillian's voice as she laughed and whispered with Kaine.

"Yes," she said, exchanging identities, "you know."

He looked up and caught the girl's self-possession glances. "Oh!" he said, "I should!" Then again he looked away. It was intolerable this feeling of being caged up!—a sense of anger great through his mind. It almost seemed that Lillian had brought him there to prove that she had finished with him—had cast him aside, having used him for the day's excitement as she had used her poolies, her Persian cats, her crystal-gazing. All at once the history and uncertainty of his position galled him. Turning swiftly in his seat, he glanced back to where she sat, slowly swaying her fan, her pale, golden hair and her pale-colored gown delicately silhouetted against the background of the box.

"What's your idea of the play, Lillian?" he said, abruptly. To his own ears there was a note of challenge in his voice.

She looked round languidly. "Oh, it's quite amusing," she said. "It makes a delicious farce—absolutely French."

"French?"

"Quite. Don't you think so, Lillian?"

"Oh, quite," Kaine agreed. "They mean that it's so very light—and yet so very subtle, Mr. Chilcote," Mary Esseltyne explained.

"Indeed?" he said. "Then my imagination was at fault. I thought the piece was serious."

"Serious?" Lillian smiled again. "Why, where's your sense of humor? The motive of the play debars all seriousness."

Loder looked down at the program still between his hands. "What is the motive?" he asked.

Lillian waved her fan once or twice, then closed it softly. "Love is the motive," she said.

Now the balancing—the adjusting of impression and inspiration—is, of all processes in life, the most delicate fine. The simple sound of the word "love" coming at that precise juncture changed the whole tenor of Loder's thought. It fell like a seed, and like a seed in ultrapowerful soil, it bore fruit with amazing rapidity.

meaningly as she closed her fan. "So good of you to come, Jack!" she added. "Let me introduce you to Miss Esseltyne; I don't think you two have met. This is Mr. Chilcote, Mary—the great, new Mr. Chilcote." Again she laughed.

Loder bowed and moved to the front of the box, nodding to Kaine as he passed.

"It's only for an hour," he explained to Lillian. "I have an appointment for eleven." He turned and bowed to the third occupant of the box—a remarkably young and well-dressed girl with wide-awake eyes and a reticent nose.

"Only an hour! Oh, how unkind! How should I punish him, Lennie?" Lillian looked round at Kaine with a lingering, caressing glance.

He bent towards her in quick response and answered in a whisper. She laughed and replied in an equally low tone.

Loder, to whom both remarks had been inaudible, dropped into the vacant seat beside Mary Esseltyne. He had the unspoken feeling that things were not falling out exactly as he had calculated.

"What is the play like?" he asked as he looked towards his companion. At all times social trivialities bored him; tonight they were intolerable. He had come to fight, but all at once it seemed that there was no opponent. Lillian's attitude disturbed him; her careless gracefulness, her evident ignoring of him for Kaine, might mean nothing—but also it might mean much.

So he speculated as he put his question and spurred his attention towards the girl's answer; but with the speculation came the resolve to hold his own—to meet his enemy upon whatever ground she chose to appropriate.

The girl looked at him with interest. She, too, had heard of his triumph.

"It is a good play," she responded. "I like it better than the book. You've read the book, of course?"

"No," Loder tried hard to fix his thoughts.

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