THE MASQUERADER

BY KATHERINE CECIL THURSTON

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SIXTEENTH INSTALLMENT

Chapter XXX—Continued

The orchestra was playing a Hungarian dance—its erratic harmonies and wild alternations of expression falling abruptly across the pinks and blues, the gilding and lights of the pretty, conventional theatre. Something in the suggestion of unfitness appealed to Loder. It was the force of the real as opposed to the ideal. With a new expression on his face, he turned again to Kaine.

"And how does it work?" he said. "This treatment that you find so—French?"

His voice as well as his expression had changed. He still spoke quietly, but he spoke with interest. He was no longer conscious of his vague and uneasiness; a fresh chord had been struck in his mind, and his curiosity had responded to it. For the first time it occurred to him that love—the dangerous, mysterious garden whose paths had so suddenly stretched out before his own feet—was a pleasure-ground that possessed many doors—and an infinite number of keys. He was stirred by the desire to peer through another entrance than his own, to see the secret, alluring byways from another stand-point. He waited with interest for the answer to his question.

For a second or two Kaine continued to survey the house; then his eye-glass dropped from his eye and he turned round.

"To understand the thing," he said, pleasantly, "you must have read the book. Have you read the book?"

"No, Mr. Kaine," Mary Esseltyn interrupted. "Mr. Chilcote hasn't read the book."

Lillian laughed. "Outline the story for him, Lennie," she said. "I love to see other people taking pains."

Kaine glanced at her admiringly. "Well, to begin with," he said, amiably, "two men, an artist and a millionaire, exchange lives. See?"

"You may presume that he does see, Lennie."

"Right! Well, then, as I say, these beggars change identities. They're as like as pins; and to all appearances one chap's the other chap—and the other chap's the first chap. See?"

Loder laughed. The newly quickened interest was enhanced by treading on dangerous ground.

"Well, they change for a lark, of course, but there's one fact they both overlook. They're men, you know, and they forget these little things!" He laughed delightedly. "They overlook the fact that one of 'em has got a wife!"

There was a crash of music from the orchestra. Loder sat straighter in his seat; he was conscious that the blood had rushed into his face.

"Oh, indeed?" he said, quickly. "One of them had a wife?"

"Exactly!" Again Kaine chuckled. "And the point of the joke is that the wife is the least larky person under the sun. See?"

A second hot wave passed over Loder's face; a sense of mental distrust filled him. This, then, was the wonderful garden seen from another stand-point! He looked from Lillian, graceful, skeptical, and shallow, to the young girl beside him, frankly modern in her appreciation of life. This, then, was love as seen by the eyes of the world—the world that accepts, judges, and condemns in a slang phrase or two! Very slowly the blood receded from his face.

"And the end of the story?" he asked, in a strained voice.

"The end? Oh, usual end, of course. Chap makes a mess of things and the bubble bursts."

"And the end of the wife?"

"The end of the wife?" Lillian broke in, with a little laugh. "Why, the end of all stupid people who, instead of going through life with a lot of delightfully human stumbles, come just one big cropper. She naturally ends in the divorce court!"

They all laughed boisterously. Then laughter, story, and denouement were all drowned in a tumultuous crash of music. The orchestra ceased; there was a slight hum of applause; and the curtain rose on the second act of the comedy.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A FEW minutes before the curtain fell on the second act of "Other Men's Shoes" Loder rose from his seat and made his apologies to Lillian.

At any other moment he might have pondered over her manner of accepting them—the easy indifference with which she let him go. But vastly keener issues were claiming his attention, issues whose results were wide and black.

He left the theatre, and, refusing the overtures of cabmen, set himself to walk to Chilcote's house. His face was hard and emotionless as he hurried forward, but the chaos in his mind found expression in the unevenness of his pace. To a strong man the confronting of difficulties is never alarming and is often fraught with inspiration; but this applies essentially to the difficulties evolved through the weakness, the folly, or the force of another; when they arise from within the matter is of another character. It is in presence of his own soul—and in that presence alone—that a man may truly measure himself.

As Loder walked onward, treading the whole familiar length of traffic-filled street, he realized for the first time that he was standing before that solemn tribunal—that the hour had come when he must answer to himself for himself. The longer and deeper an oblivion the more painful the awakening. For months the song of self had beaten about his ears, deadening all other sound; now abruptly that song had ceased—not considerately, not lingeringly, but with a suddenness that made the succeeding silence very terrible.

He walked onward, keeping his direction unseeingly. He was passing through the fire as surely as though actual flames rose about his feet; and whatever the result, whatever the fibre of the man who emerged from the ordeal, the John Loder who had hewn his way through the past weeks would exist no more. The triumphant egotist—the strong man—who, by his own strength, had kept his eyes upon one point, refusing to see in other directions, had ceased to be.

Keen though it was, his realization of this crisis in his life had come with characteristic slowness. When Lillian Astrupp had given her dictum, when the music of the orchestra had ceased and the curtain risen on the second act of the play, nothing but a sense of stupefaction had filled his mind. In that moment the great song was silenced, not by any portentous episode, not by any incident that could have lent dignity to its end, but—with the full measure of life's irony—by a trivial social commonplace. In the first sensation of blank loss his faculties had been numbed; in the quarter of an hour that followed the rise of the curtain he had sat staring at the stage, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, filled with the enormity of the void that suddenly surrounded him. Then, from habit, from constitutional tendency, he had begun slowly and perseveringly to draw first one thread and then another from the tangle of his thoughts—to forge with doubt and difficulty the chain that was to draw him towards the future.

It was upon this same incomplete chain that his mind worked as he traversed the familiar streets and at last gained the house he had so easily learned to call home.

As he inserted the latch-key and felt it move smoothly in the lock, a momentary revolt against his own judgment, his own censorship swung him sharply towards reaction. But it is only the blind who can walk without a tremor on the edge of an abyss, and there was no longer a bandage across his eyes. The reaction flared up like a strip of lighted paper; then, like a strip of lighted paper, it dropped back to ashes. He pushed the door open and slowly crossed the hall.

The mounting of a staircase is often the index to a man's state of mind. As Loder ascended the stairs of Chilcote's house his shoulders lacked their stiffness, his head was no longer erect; he moved as though his feet were weighted. He had ceased to be the man of achievement whose smallest opinion compels consideration; in the privacy of solitude he was the mere human flotsam to which he had once compared himself—the flotsam that, dreaming it has found a harbor, wakes to find itself the prey of the incoming tide.

He paused at the head of the stairs to rally his resolutions; then, still walking heavily, he passed down the corridor to Eve's room. It was suggestive of his character that, having made his decision, he did not dally over its performance. Without waiting to knock, he turned the handle and walked into the room.

It looked precisely as it always looked, but to Loder the rich, subdued coloring of books and flowers—the whole air of culture and repose that the place conveyed—seemed to hold a deeper meaning than before; and it was on the instant that his eyes, crossing the inanimate objects, rested on their owner that the true force of his position, the enormity of the task before him, made itself plain. Realization came to him with vivid, overwhelming force; and it must be accounted to his credit, in the summing of his qualities, that then, in that moment of trial, the thought of retreat, the thought of yielding did not present itself.

Eve was standing by the mantelpiece. She wore a beautiful gown, a long string of diamonds was twisted about her neck, and her soft, black hair was coiled high after a foreign fashion, and held in place by a large diamond comb. As he entered she turned hastily, almost nervously, and looked at him with the rapid, searching glance he had learned to expect from her; then, almost directly, her expression changed to one of quick concern. With a faint exclamation of alarm she stepped forward.

"What has happened?" she said. "You look like a ghost."

Loder made no answer. Moving into the room, he paused by the oak table that stood between the fireplace and the door.

They made an unconscious tableau as they stood there—he with his hard, set face, she with her heightened color, her inexplicably bright eyes. They stood completely silent for a space—a space that for Loder held no suggestion of time; then, finding the tension unbearable, Eve spoke again.

"Has anything happened?" she asked. "Is anything wrong?"

Had he been less engrossed the intensity of her concern might have struck him; but in a mind so harassed as his there was only room for one consideration—the consideration of himself. The sense of her question reached him, but its significance left him untouched.

"Is anything wrong?" she reiterated for the second time.

By an effort he raised his eyes. No man, he thought, since the beginning of the world was ever set a task so cruel as his. Painfully and slowly his lips parted.

"Everything in the world is wrong," he said, in a slow, hard voice.

Eve said nothing but her color suddenly deepened.

Again Loder was unobservant. But with the dogged resolution that marked him he forced himself to his task.

"You despise lies," he said, at last. "Tell me what you would think of a man whose whole life was one elaborated lie?" The words were slightly exaggerated, but their utterance, their painfully brusque sincerity, precluded all suggestion of effect. Resolutely holding her gaze he repeated his question.

"Tell me! Answer me! I want to know."

Eve's attitude was difficult to read. She stood twisting the string of diamonds between her fingers.

"Tell me!" he said again.

She continued to look at him for a moment; then, as if some fresh impulse moved her, she turned away from him towards the fire.

"I cannot," she said. "We—I—I could not set myself to judge—any one."

Loder held himself rigidly in hand.

"Eve," he said, quietly. "I was at the 'Arcadian' tonight. The play was 'Other Men's Shoes.' I suppose you've read the book 'Other Men's Shoes?'"

She was leaning on the mantelpiece and her face was invisible to him. "Yes. I have read it," she said, without looking round.

"It is the story of an extraordinary likeness between two men. Do you believe such a likeness possible? Do you think such a thing could exist?" He spoke with difficulty; his brain and tongue both felt numb.

Eve let the diamond chain slip from her fingers. "Yes," she said, nervously. "Yes, I do believe it. Such things have been—"

Loder caught at the words. "You're quite right," he said, quickly. "You're quite right. The thing is possible—I've proved it. I know a man so like me that you, even you could not tell us apart."

Eve was silent, still averting her face.

In dire difficulty he labored on. "Eve," he began once more, "such a likeness is a serious thing—a terrible danger—a terrible temptation. Those who have no experience of it cannot possibly gauge its pitfalls—" Again he paused, but again the silent figure by the fireplace gave him no help.

"Eve," he exclaimed, suddenly. "If you only knew, if you only guessed what I'm trying to say—" The perplexity, the whole harassed suffering of his mind showed in the words. Loder, the strong, the resourceful, the self-contained, was palpably, painfully at a loss. There was almost a note of appeal in the vibration of his voice.

And Eve, standing by the fireplace, heard and understood. In that moment of comprehension all that had held her silent, all the conflicting motives that had forbidden speech, melted away before the unconscious demand for help. Quietly and yet quickly she turned, her whole face transfigured by a light that seemed to shine from within—something singularly soft and tender.

"There's no need to say anything," she said, simply, "because I know."

It came quietly, as most great revelations come. Her voice was low and free from any excitement, her face beautiful in its complete unconsciousness of self. In that supreme moment all her thought, all her sympathy was for the man—and his suffering.

To Loder there was a space of incredulity; then his brain slowly swung to realization. "You know?" he repeated, blankly. "You know?"

Without answering she walked to a cabinet that stood in the window, unlocked a drawer, and drew out several sheets of flimsy white paper, crumpled in places and closely covered with writing. Without a word she carried them back and held them out.

He took them in silence, scanned them, then looked up.

In a long, worthless pause their eyes met. It was as if each looked speculatively into the other's heart, seeing the passions, the contradictions, the short-comings that went to the making of both. In that silence they drew closer together than they could have done through a torrent of words. There was no asking of forgiveness, no elaborate confession on either side; in the deep, eloquent pause they mutually saw and mutually understood.

"When I came into the morning-room today," Eve said, at last, "and saw Lillian Astrupp reading that telegram, nothing could have seemed further from me than the thought that I should follow her example. It was not until afterwards; not until—he came into the room; until I saw that you, as I believed, had fallen back again from what I respected to what I—despised—that I knew how human I really was. As I watched them laugh and talk I felt suddenly that I was alone again—terribly alone. I—I think—I believe I was jealous in that moment—" She hesitated.

"Eve!" he exclaimed.

But she broke in quickly on the word. "I felt different in that moment. I didn't care about honor—or things like honor. After they had gone it seemed to me that I had missed something—something that they possessed. Oh, you don't know what a woman feels when she is jealous!" Again she paused. "It was then that the telegram, and the thought of Lillian's amused smile as she had read it, came to my mind. Feeling as I did—acting on what I felt—I crossed to the bureau and picked it up. In one second I had seen enough to make it impossible to draw back. Oh, it may have been dishonorable, it may have been mean, but I wonder if any woman in the world would have done otherwise! I crumpled up the papers just as they were and carried them to my own room."

From the first to the last word of Eve's story Loder's eyes never left her face. Instantly she had finished his voice broke forth in irrepressible question. In that wonderful space of time he had learned many things. All his deductions, all his apprehensions had been scattered and disproved. He had seen the true meaning of Lillian Astrupp's amused indifference—the indifference of a variable, flippant nature that, robbed of any real weapon for mischief, soon tires of a game that promises to be too arduous. He saw all this and understood it with a rapidity born of the moment; nevertheless, when Eve ceased to speak the question that broke from him was not connected with this great discovery—was not even suggestive of it. It was something quite immaterial to any real issue, but something that overshadowed every consideration in the world.

"Eve," he said, "tell me your first thought? Your first thought after the shock and the surprise—when you remembered me?"

There was a fresh pause, but one of very short duration; then Eve met his glance fearlessly and frankly. The same pride and dignity, the same indescribable tenderness that had responded to his first appeal shone in her face.

"My first thought was a great thankfulness," she said, simply. "A thankfulness that you—that no man—could ever understand."

CHAPTER XXXII

AS she finished speaking Eve did not lower her eyes. To her there was no suggestion of shame in her thoughts or her words; but to Loder, watching and listening, there was a perilous meaning contained in both.

"Thankfulness?" he repeated, slowly. From his newly stirred sense of responsibility pity and sympathy were gradually rising. He had never seen Eve as he saw her now, and his vision was all the clearer for the long oblivion. With a poignant sense of compassion and remorse, the knowledge of her youth came to him—the youth that some women preserve in the midst of the world, when circumstances have permitted them to see much but to experience little.

"Thankfulness?" he said again, incredulously.

A slight smile touched her lips. "Yes," she answered, softly. "Thankfulness that my trust had been rightly placed."

She spoke simply and confidently, but the words struck Loder more sharply than any accusation. With a heavy sense of bitterness and renunciation he moved slowly forward.

"Eve," he said, very gently, "you don't know what you say."

She had lowered her eyes as he came towards her and now again she lifted them in a swift, upward glance. For the first time since he had entered the room a slight look of personal doubt and uneasiness showed in her face. "Why?" she said. "I—I don't understand."

For a moment he answered nothing. He had found his first explanation overwhelming; now suddenly it seemed to him that his present difficulty was more impossible to surmount. "I came here to-night to tell you something," he began, at last, "but so far I have only said half—"

"Half?"

"Yes, half." He repeated the word quickly, avoiding the question in her eyes. Then, conscious of the need for explanation, he plunged into rapid speech.

"A fraud like mine," he said, "has only one safeguard, one justification—a boundless audacity. Once shake that audacity and the whole motive power crumbles. It was to make the audacity impossible—to tell you the truth and make it impossible—that I came tonight. The fact that you already knew made the telling easier—but it altered nothing."

Eve raised her head, but he went resolutely on.

"To-night," he said, "I have seen into my own life, into my own mind, and my ideas have been very roughly shaken into new places.

"We never make so colossal a mistake as when we imagine that we know ourselves. Months ago, when your husband first proposed this scheme to me, I was, according to my own conception, a solitary being vastly ill-used by Fate, who, with a fine stoicism, was leading a clean life. That was what I believed; but there, at the very outset, I deceived myself. I was simply a man who shut himself up because he cherished a grudge against life, and who lived honestly because he had a constitutional distaste for vice. My first feeling when I saw your husband was one of self-righteous contempt, and that has been my attitude all along. I have often marvelled at the flood of intolerance that has rushed over me at sight of him—the violent desire that has possessed me to look away from his weakness and banish the knowledge of it; but now I understand.

"I know now what the feeling meant. The knowledge came to me to-night. It meant that I turned away from his weakness because deep within myself something stirred in recognition of it. Humanity is really much simpler than we like to think, and human impulses have an extraordinary fundamental connection. Weakness is egotism — but so is strength. Chilcote has followed his vice; I have followed my ambition. It will take a higher judgment than yours or mine to say which of us has been the more selfish man." He paused and looked at her.

She was watching him intently. Some of the meaning in his face had found a pained, alarmed reflection in her own. But the awe and wonder of the morning's discovery still colored her mind too vividly to allow of other considerations possessing their proper value. The thrill of exultation with which the misgivings born of Chilcote's vice had dropped away from her mental image of Loder was still too absorbing to be easily dominated. She loved, and as if by a miracle her love had been justified! For the moment the justification was all-sufficing. Something of confidence—something of the innocence that comes not from ignorance of evil but from a mind singularly uncontaminated—blinded her to the danger of her position.

Loder, waiting apprehensively for some aid, some expression of opinion, became gradually conscious of this lack of realization. Moved by a fresh impulse, he crossed the small space that divided them and caught her hands.

"Eve," he said, gently, "I have been trying to analyze myself and give you the results; but I won't try any more; I shall be quite plain with you.

"From the first moment I took your husband's place I was ambitious. You unconsciously aroused the feeling when you brought me Fraide's message on the first night. You aroused it by your words—but more strongly, though more obscurely, by your underlying antagonism. On that night, though I did not know it, I took up my position—I made my determination. Do you know what that determination was?"

She shook her head.

"It was the desire to stamp out Chilcote's footmarks with my own—to prove that personality is the great force capable of everything. I forgot to reckon that when we draw largely upon Fate she generally extorts a crushing interest.

"First came the wish for your respect; then the desire to stand well with such men as Fraide—to feel the stir of emulation and competition—to prove myself strong in the one career I knew myself really fitted for. For a time the second ambition overshadowed the first, but the first was bound to reassert itself; and in a moment of egotism I conceived the notion of winning your enthusiasm as well as your respect.

Eve's face, alert and questioning, suddenly paled as a doubt crossed her mind.

"Then it was only—only to stand well with me?"

"I believed it was only the desire to stand well with you; I believed it until the night of my speech—if you can credit anything so absurd—then on that night, as I came up the stairs to the gallery and saw you standing there, the blindness fell away and I knew that I loved you." As he said the last words he released her hands and turned aside, missing the quick wave of joy and color that crossed her face.

"I knew it, but it made no difference; I was only moved to a higher self-glorification. I touched supremacy that night. But as we drove home I experienced the strangest coincidence of my life. You remember the block in the traffic at Piccadilly?"

Again Eve bent her head.

"Well, when I looked out of the carriage window to discover its cause the first man I saw was—Chilcote."

Eve started slightly. This swift, unexpected linking of Chilcote's name with the most exalted moment of her life stirred her unpleasantly. Some glimmering of Loder's intention in so linking it, broke through the web of disturbed and conflicting thoughts.

"You saw him on that night?"

"Yes; and the sight chilled me. It was a big drop from supremacy to the remembrance of—everything."

Involuntarily she put out her hand.

But Loder shook his head. "No," he said, "don't pity me! The sight of him came just in time. I had a reaction in that moment, and, such as it was, I acted on it. I went to him next morning and told him that the thing must end. But then—even then—I shirked being honest with myself. I had meant to tell him that it must end because I had grown to love you, but my pride rose up and tied my tongue. I could not humiliate myself. I put the case before him in another light. It was a tussle of wills—and I won; but the victory was not what it should have been. That was proved today when he returned to tell me of the loss of this telegram. It wasn't the fear that Lady Astrupp had found it; it wasn't to save the position that I jumped at the chance of coming back; it was to feel the joy of living, the joy of seeing you—if only for a day!" For one second he turned towards her, then as abruptly he turned away again.

"I was still thinking of myself," he said. "I was still utterly self-centered when I came to this room today and allowed you to talk to me—when I asked you to see me to-night as we parted at the club. I shan't tell you the thoughts that unconsciously were in my mind when I asked that favor. You must understand without explanation.

"I went to the theatre with Lady Astrupp ostensibly to find out how the land lay in her direction—really to heighten my self-esteem. But there Fate—or the power we like to call by that name—was lying in wait for me, ready to claim the first interest in the portion of life I had dared to borrow." He said this slowly, as if measuring each word. He did not glance towards Eve as he had done in his previous pause. His whole manner seemed oppressed by the gravity of what he had still to say.

"I doubt if a man has ever seen more in half an hour than I have tonight," he said. "I'm speaking of mental seeing, of course. In this play, 'Other Men's Shoes,' two men change identities—as Chilcote and I have done—but in doing so they overlook one fact— The fact that one of them has a wife! That's not my way of puting it; it's the way it was put to me by one of Lady Astrupp's party."

Again Eve looked up. The doubt and question in her eyes had grown unmistakably. As he ceased to speak her lips parted quickly.

"John," she said, with sudden conviction, "you're trying to say something—something that's terribly hard."

Without raising his head, Loder answered her. "Yes," he answered, "the hardest thing a man ever said—"

His tone was short, almost brusque, but to ears sharpened by instinct it was eloquent. Without a word Eve took a step forward, and, standing quite close to him, laid both hands on his shoulders.

For a space they stood silent, she with her face lifted, he with averted eyes. Then very gently he raised his hands and tried to unclasp her fingers. There was scarcely any color visible in his face, and by a curious effect of emotion it seemed that lines, never before noticeable, had formed about his mouth.

"What is it?" Eve asked, apprehensively. "What is it?"

By a swift, involuntary movement she had tightened the pressure of her fingers; and, without using force, it was impossible for Loder to unloose them. With his hands pressed irresolutely over hers he looked down into her face.

"As I sat in the theatre tonight, Eve," he said, slowly, "all the pictures I had formed of life shifted. Without desiring it, without knowing it, my whole point of view was changed. I suddenly saw things by the world's searchlight, instead of by my own miserable candle. I suddenly saw things for you—instead of for myself."

Eve's eyes widened and darkened, but she said nothing.

"I suddenly saw the unpardonable wrong that I have done you—the imperative duty of cutting it short." He spoke very slowly, in a dull, mechanical voice.

Eve—her eyes still wide, her face pained and alarmed—withdrew her hands from his shoulders. "You mean," she said, with difficulty, "that it is going to end? That you are going away? That you are giving everything up? Oh, but you can't! You can't!" she exclaimed, with sudden excitement, her fears suddenly overmastering her incredulity. "You can't! You mustn't! The only proof that could have interfered—"

"I wasn't thinking of the proof."

"Then of what? Of what?"

Loder was silent for a moment. "Of our love," he said, steadily.

She colored deeply. "But why?" she stammered; "why? We have done no wrong. We need do no wrong. We would be friends—nothing more; and I—oh, I so need a friend!"

For almost the first time in Loder's knowledge of her, her voice broke, her control deserted her. She stood before him in all the pathos of her lonely girlhood, her empty life.

(To be concluded)

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 a political power, but is not suspected by Chilcote's beautiful but unhappy wife,

EVE. At a social function

LADY LILLIAN ASTRUPP, intimate of Chilcote, makes Loder remove his rings, exposing the give-away scar on his finger. Loder, recognizing her as a woman who had jilted him, eludes her. Loder is recalled by Chilcote, who resumes his own life. Chilcote makes an appointment to dine with Lady Astrupp. 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 presence of Lady Astrupp. She declares he is not Chilcote. He warns her before leaving that none will believe her story. Russian acts of aggression against British trading interests in Persia culminating in the assassination of a British consul-general give Loder his great political opportunity. He delivers an epochal speech in Parliament that overturns the cabinet. There are tears of joy in Eve's eyes. Realizing he loves her, he decides to quit the masquerade. The wretched Chilcote cannot, however, continue and 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, in Chilcote's clothes, that night attends the theatre with Lady Astrupp, Leonard Kaine and Miss Esseltyn. The play is about two men who have exchanged identities. Lillian explains the motive is love. Kaine asks if love is ever serious in a three-act comedy—on or off the stage.

For almost the first time in Loder's knowledge of her her voice broke, her control deserted her. [Guy Bates Post and Ruth Sinclair in "The Masquerader."]