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 Booth's dramatization, Guy Bates Post is now appearing

SEVENTEENTH INSTALLMENT

Chapter XXXII—Continued

Conclusion

The revelation touched him with sudden poignancy; the real strength that lay beneath his faults, the chivalry buried under years of callousness, stirred at the birth of a new emotion. The resolution preserved at such a cost, the sacrifice that had seemed wellnigh impossible, all at once took on a different shape. What before had been a barren duty became suddenly a sacred right. Holding out his arms, he drew her to him as if she had been a child.

"Eve," he said, gently, "I have learned tonight how fully a woman's life is at the mercy of the world—and how scanty that mercy is. If circumstances had been different, I believe—I am convinced—I would have made you a good husband—would have used my right to protect you as well as a man could use it. And now that things are different, I want—I should like—" He hesitated a very little. "Now that I have no right to protect you—except the right my love gives—I want to guard you as closely from all that is sordid as any husband could guard his wife.

"In life there are really only two broad issues—right and wrong. Whatever we may say, whatever we may profess to believe, we know that our action is always a choice between right and wrong. A month ago—a week ago—I would have despised a man who could talk like this—and have thought myself strong for despising him. Now I know that strength is something more than the trampling of others into the dust that we ourselves may have a clear road; that it is something much harder and much less triumphant than that—that it is standing aside to let somebody else pass on. Eve," he exclaimed, suddenly, "I'm trying to do this for you. Don't you see? Don't you understand? The easy course, the happy course, would be to let things drift. Every instinct is calling to me to take that course—to go on as I have gone, trading on Chilcote's weakness and your generosity. But I won't do it! I can't do it!" With a swift impulse he loosed his arms and held her away from him. "Eve, it's the first time I have put another human being before myself!"

Eve kept her head bent. Painful, inaudible sobs were shaking her from head to foot.

"It's something in you—something unconscious—something high and fine, that holds me back—that literally bars the way. Eve, can't you see—that I'm fighting—fighting hard?"

After he had spoken there was silence—a long, painful silence—during which Eve waged the battle that so many of her sex have waged before; the battle in which words are useless and tears of no account. She looked very slight, very young, very forlorn, as she stood there. Then, in the oppressive silence of waiting that filled the whole room, she looked up at him.

Her face was stained with tears, her thick, black lashes were still wet with them; but her expression, as her eyes met Loder's, was a strange example of the courage, the firmness, the power of sacrifice that may be hidden in a fragile vessel.

She said nothing, for in such a moment words do not come easily, but with the simplest, most submissive, most eloquent gesture in the world she set his perplexity to rest.

Taking his hand between hers, she lifted it and for a long, silent space held it against her lips.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

For a while there was silence; then Loder, bitterly aware that he had conquered, poignantly conscious of the appeal that Eve's attitude made, found further endurance impossible. Gently freeing his hand, he moved away from her to the fireplace, taking up the position that she had first occupied.

"Eve," he said, slowly, "I haven't finished yet. I haven't said everything. I'm going to tax your courage further."

With a touch of pained alarm, Eve lifted her head. "Further?" she said.

Loder shrank from the expression of her face. "Yes," he said, with difficulty. "There's still another point to be faced. The matter doesn't end with my going back. To have the situation fully saved, Chilcote must return—Chilcote must be brought to realize his responsibilities."

Eve's lips parted in dumb dismay.

"It must be done," he went on hurriedly, "and we have got to do it—you and I." He turned and looked at her.

"I? I could do nothing. What could I do?" Her voice failed.

"Everything," he said, "you could do everything. He is morally weak, but he has one sensitive point—the fear of a public exposure. Once make it plain to him that you know his secret, and you can compel him to whatever course of action you select. It was to ask you to do this—to beg you to do this—that I came to you tonight. I know that it's demanding more than a woman's resolution—more than a woman's strength. But you are like no woman in the world!

"Eve!" he cried, with sudden vehemence, "can't you see that it's imperative—the one thing to save us both?"

He stopped abruptly as he had begun, and again a painful silence filled the room. Then, as before, Eve moved instinctively towards him, but this time her steps were slow and uncertain. Nearing his side, she put out her hand as if for comfort and support; and, feeling his fingers tighten round it, stood for a moment resting in the contact.

"I understand," she said at last, very slowly. "I understand. When will you take me to him?"

For a moment Loder said nothing, not daring to trust his voice; then he answered, low and abruptly. "Now!" he said. "Now, at once! Now, this moment, if I may. And—and remember that I know what it costs you." As if imbued with fear that his courage might fail him, he suddenly released her hand, and, crossing the room to where a long, dark cloak lay as she had thrown it on her return home, he picked it up, walked to her side, and silently wrapped it about her. Then, still acting automatically, he moved to the door, opened it, and stood aside while she passed out into the corridor.

In complete silence they descended the stairs and passed to the hall door. There Crapham, who had returned to his duties since Loder's entrance, came quickly forward with an offer of service.

But Loder dismissed him curtly; and with something of the confusion bred of Chilcote's regime, the man drew back towards the staircase.

With a jerky movement Loder stepped forward, and, opening the door, admitted a breath of chill air. Then on the threshold he paused. It was his first sign of hesitation—the one instant in which nature rebelled against the conscience so tardily awakened. He stood motionless for a moment, and it is doubtful whether even Eve fully fathomed the bitterness of his renunciation—the blackness of the night that stretched before his eyes.

Behind him was everything; before him, nothing. The everything symbolized by the luxurious house, the eagerly attentive servants, the pleasant atmosphere of responsibility; the nothing represented by the broad public thoroughfare, the passing figures, each unconscious of and uninterested in his existence. As an interloper he had entered this house; as an interloper—a masquerader—he had played his part, lived his hour, proved himself; as an interloper he was now passing back into the dim world of unrealized hopes and unachieved ambitions.

He stood rigidly quiet, his strong figure silhouetted against the lighted hall, his face cold and set; then, with a touch of fatality, Chance cut short his struggle.

An empty hansom wheeled round the corner of the square; the cabman, seeing him, raised his whip in query, and involuntarily he nodded an acquiescence. A moment later he had helped Eve into the cab.

"Middle Temple Lane!" he directed, pausing on the step.

"Middle Temple Lane is opposite to Clifford's Inn," he explained as he took his place beside her. "When we get out there we have only to cross Fleet Street."

Eve bent her head in token that she understood, and the cab moved out into the roadway.

Within a few minutes the neighborhood of Grosvenor Square was exchanged for the noisier and more crowded one of Piccadilly, but either the cabman was overcautious or the horse was below the average, for they made but slow progress through the more crowded streets. To the two sitting in silence the pace was wellnigh unbearable. With every added movement the tension grew. The methodical car with which they moved seemed like the tightening of a string already strained to breaking-point, yet neither spoke—because neither had the courage necessary for words.

Once or twice as they traversed the Strand, Loder made a movement as if to break the silence, but nothing followed it. He continued to lean forward with a certain dogged stiffness, his clasped hands resting on the doors of the cab, his eyes staring straight ahead. Not once, as they threaded their way, did he dare to glance at Eve, though every movement, every stir of her garments, was forced upon his consciousness by his acutely awakened senses.

When at last they drew up before the dark archway of Middle Temple Lane, he descended hastily. And as he mechanically turned to protect Eve's dress from the wheel, he looked at her fully for the first time since their enterprise had been undertaken. As he looked he felt his heart sink. He had expected to see the marks of suffering on her face, but the expression he saw suggested something more than mere mental pain.

All the rich color that usually deepened and softened the charm of her beauty had been erased as if by a long illness; and against the new pallor of her skin her blue eyes, her black hair and eyebrows, seemed startlingly dark. A chill colder than remorse, a chill that bordered upon actual fear, touched Loder in that moment. With the first impulsive gesture he had allowed himself, he touched her arm.

"Eve—" he began, unsteadily; then the word died off his lips.

Without a sound, almost without a movement, she returned his glance, and something in her eyes checked what he might have said. In that one expressive look he understood all she had desired, all she had renounced—the full extent of the ordeal she had consented to, and the motive that had compelled her consent. He drew back with the heavy sense that repentance and pity were equally futile—equally out of place.

Still in silence she stepped to the pavement and stood aside while Loder dismissed the cab. To both there was something symbolic, something prophetic, in the dismissal. Without intention and almost unconsciously they drew closer together as the horse turned, its hoofs clattering on the roadway, its harness jingling; and, still without realization, they looked after the vehicle as it moved away down the long, shadowed thoroughfare towards the lights and the crowds that they had left. At last involuntarily they turned towards each other.

"Come!" Loder said, abruptly. "It's only across the road."

Fleet Street is generally very quiet, once midnight is passed; and Eve had no need of guidance or protection as they crossed the pavement, shining like ice in the lamplight. They crossed it slowly, walking apart; for the dread of physical contact that had possessed them in the cab seemed to have fallen on them again.

Inquisitiveness has little place in the region of the city, and they gained the opposite footpath unnoticed by the casual passers-by. Then, still holding apart, they reached and entered Clifford's Inn.

Inside the entrance they paused, and Eve shivered involuntarily. "How gray it is!" she said, faintly. "And how cold! Like a graveyard."

Loder turned to her. For one moment control seemed shaken; his blood surged, his vision clouded; the sense that life and love were still within his reach filled him overwhelmingly. He turned towards Eve; he half extended his hands. Then, stirred by what impulse, moved by what instinct it was impossible to say, he let them drop to his sides again.

"Come!" he said. "Come! This is the way. Keep close to me. Put your hand on my arm."

He spoke quietly, but his eyes were resolutely averted from her face as they crossed the dim, silent court.

Entering the gloomy doorway that led to his own rooms, he felt her fingers tremble on his arm, then tighten in their pressure as the bare passage and cheerless stairs met his view; but he set his lips.

"Come!" he repeated, in the same strained voice. "Come! It isn't far—three or four flights."

With a white face and a curious expression in her eyes, Eve moved forward. She had released Loder's arm as they crossed the hall; and now, reaching the stairs, she put out her hand gropingly and caught the banister. She had a pained, numb sense of submission—of suffering that had sunk to apathy. Moving forward without resistance, she began to mount the stairs.

The ascent was made in silence. Loder went first, his shoulders braced, his head held erect; Eve, mechanically watchful of all his movements, followed a step or two behind. With weary monotony one flight of stairs succeeded another; each, to her unaccustomed eyes, seeming more colorless, more solitary, more desolate than the preceding one.

Then at last, with a sinking sense of apprehension, she realized that their goal was reached.

The knowledge broke sharply through her dulled senses; and, confronted by the closeness of her ordeal, she paused, her head lifted, her hand still nervously resting on the banister. Her lips parted as if in sudden demand for aid; but in the nervous expectation, the pained apprehension, of the moment no sound escaped them. Loder, silently crossing the landing, knew nothing of the silent appeal.

For a second she stood looking; then her own weakness, her own shrinking dismay, were submerged in the interest of his movements. Slowly ascending the remaining steps, she followed him as if fascinated towards the door that showed dingily conspicuous in the light of an unshaded gaslet.

Almost at the moment that she reached his side he extended his hand towards the door. The action was decisive and hurried, as though he feared to trust himself.

She ceased to speak; there was a moment of suspense; then Loder turned. [Guy Bates Post as John Loder and Ruth Sinclair as Eve Chilcote in "The Masquerader."]

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, then he eludes her. Loder is recalled by Chilcote, who resumes his own life. Chilcote makes an appointment to dine with Lady Lillian. He forgets and changes places with Loder, who, noting the date and 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 Lady Astrupp's presence. 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 big political opportunity. He delivers a great speech 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 imploring Loder to resume the deception disappeared after a visit by Lady Astrupp. Loder, in Chilcote's clothes attends the theatre that night with Lady Astrupp. The play is about two men who have exchanged identities. Before the end of the second act Loder excuses himself and goes home to Eve. He confesses all to her, then learns that she already has seen the telegram. She loves him and wants him to continue the masquerade as a friend. But he forms an unselfish resolution.

For a space he fumbled with the lock. And Eve, standing close behind him, heard the handle creak and turn under his pressure. Then he shook the door.

At last, slowly, almost reluctantly, he turned round. "I'm afraid things aren't quite—quite right," he said, in a low voice. "The door is locked and I can see no light."

She raised her eyes quickly. "But you have a key?" she whispered. "Haven't you got a key?" It was obvious that, to both, the unexpected check to their designs was fraught with danger.

"Yes, but—" He looked towards the door. "Yes—I have a key. Yes, you're right!" he added, quickly. "I'll use it. Wait, while I go inside."

Filled with a new nervousness, oppressed by the loneliness, the silence about her, Eve drew back obediently. The sense of mystery conveyed by the closed door weighed upon her. Her susceptibilities were tensely alert as she watched Loder search for his key and insert it in the lock. With mingled dread and curiosity she saw the door yield, and gape open like a black gash in the dingy wall; and with a sudden sense of desertion she saw him pass through the aperture and heard him strike a match.

The wait that followed seemed extraordinarily long. Listening intently, she heard him move softly from one room to the other. And at last, to her acutely nervous susceptibilities, it seemed that he paused in absolute silence. In the intensity of listening, she heard her own faint, irregular breathing, and the sound filled her with panic. The quiet, the solitude, the vague, instinctive apprehension, became suddenly unendurable. Then all at once the tension was relieved. Loder reappeared.

He paused for a second in the shadowy doorway; then he turned unsteadily, drew the door to, and locked it.

Eve stepped forward. Her glimpse of him had been momentary—and she had not heard his voice—yet the consciousness of his bearing filled her with instinctive alarm. Abruptly, and without reason, her hands turned cold, her heart began to beat violently. "John—" she said below her breath.

For answer, he moved towards her. His face was bereft of color; there was a look of consternation in his eyes. "Come!" he said. "Come at once! I must take you home." He spoke in a shaken, uncertain voice.

Eve, looking up at him, caught his hand. "Why? W—?" she questioned. Her tone was low and scared.

Without replying, he drew her imperatively towards the stairs. "Go very softly," he commanded. "No one must see you here."

In the first moment she obeyed him instinctively; then, reaching the head of the stairs, she stopped. With one hand still clasping his, the other clinging nervously to the banister, she refused to descend. "John," she whispered, "I'm not a child. What is it? What has happened? I must know."

For a moment Loder looked at her uncertainly; then, reading the expression in her eyes, he yielded to her demand.

"He's dead," he said, in a very low voice. "Chilcote is dead."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

To fully appreciate a great announcement we must have time at our disposal. At the moment of Loder's disclosure time was denied to Eve; for scarcely had the words left his lips before the thought that dominated him asserted its prior claim. Blind to the incredulity in her eyes, he drew her swiftly forward, and—half impelling, half supporting her—forced her to descend the stairs.

Never in after-life could he obliterate the remembrance of that descent. Fear, such as he could never experience in his own concerns, possessed him. One desire overrode all others—the desire that Eve's reputation, which he himself had so nearly imperilled, should remain unimperilled. In the shadow of that urgent duty, the despair of the past hours, the appalling fact so lately realized, the future with its possible trials, became dark to his imagination. In his new victory over self, the question of her protection predominated.

Moving under this compulsion, he guided her hastily and silently down the deserted stairs, drawing a breath of deep relief as, one after another, the landings were successively passed; and still actuated by the suppressed need of haste, he passed through the doorway that they had entered under such different conditions only a few minutes before.

To leave the quiet court, to gain the Strand, to hail a belated hansom was the work of a moment. By an odd contrivance of circumstance, luck that had attended every phase of his dual life was again exerted in his behalf. No one had noticed their entry into Clifford's Inn; no one was moved to curiosity by their exit. With an involuntary thrill of feeling he gave expression to his relief.

"Thank God, it's over!" he said, as a cab drew up. "You don't know what the strain has been."

Moving as if in a dream, Eve stepped into the cab. As yet the terrible denouement to their enterprise had made no clear impression upon her mind. For the moment all that she was conscious of, all that she instinctively acknowledged, was the fact that Loder was still beside her.

In quiet obedience she took her place, drawing aside her skirts to make room for him; and in the same subdued manner he stepped into the vehicle. Then, with the strange sensation of re-living their earlier drive, they were aware of the tightened rein and of the horse's first forward movement.

For several seconds neither spoke. Eve, shutting out all other thoughts, sat close to Loder, clinging tenaciously to the momentary comforting sense of protection; Loder, striving to marshal his ideas, hesitated before the ordeal of speech. At last, realizing his responsibility, he turned to her slowly.

"Eve," he said, in a low voice and with some hesitation, "I want you to know that in all this—from the moment I saw him—from the moment I understood—I have had you in my thoughts—you and no one else."

She raised her eyes to his face.

"Do you realize—?" he began afresh. "Do you know what this—this thing means?"

Still she remained silent.

"It means that after tonight there will be no such person in London as John Loder. Tomorrow the man who was known by that name will be found in his rooms; his body will be removed, and at the postmortem examination it will be stated that he died of an overdose of morphia. His charwoman will identify him as a solitary man who lived respectably for years and then suddenly went down-hill with remarkable speed. It will be quite a common case. Nothing of interest will be found in his rooms; no relation will claim his body; after the usual time he will be given the usual burial of his class. These details are horrible; but there are times when we must look at the horrible side of life—because life is incomplete without it.

"These things I speak of are the things that will meet the casual eye; but in our sight they will have a very different meaning.

"Eve," he said, more vehemently, "a whole chapter in my life has been closed tonight, and my first instinct is to slam the book and throw it away. But I'm thinking of you. Remember, I'm thinking of you! Whatever the trial, whatever the difficulty, no harm shall come to you. You have my word for that!

"I'll remain with you now to Grosvenor Square; I'll remain there till a reasonable excuse can be given for Chilcote's going abroad; I will avoid Fraide. I will cut politics—whatever the cost; then, at the first reasonable moment, I will do what I would do now, tonight if it were possible. I'll go away, start afresh; do in another country what I have done in this."

There was a long silence; then Eve turned to him. The apathy of a moment before had left her face. "In another country?" she repeated. "In another country?"

"Yes; a fresh career in a fresh country. Something clean to offer you. I'm not too old to do what other men have done."

He paused, and for a moment Eve looked ahead at the gleaming chain of lamps; then, still very slowly, she brought her glance back again. "No," she said very slowly. "You are not too old. But there are times when age—and things like age—are not the real consideration. It seems to me that your own inclination, your own individual sense of right and wrong, has nothing to do with the present moment. The question is whether you are justified in going away"—she paused, her eyes fixed steadily upon his—"whether you are free to go away, and make a new life—whether it is ever justifiable to follow a phantom light when—when there's a lantern waiting to be carried." Her breath caught; she drew away from him, frightened and elated by her own words.

Loder turned to her sharply. "Eve!" he exclaimed; then his tone changed. "You don't know what you're saying," he added, quickly; "you don't understand what you're saying."

Eve leaned forward again. "Yes," she said, slowly, "I do understand." Her voice was controlled, her manner convinced. She was no longer the girl conquered by strength greater than her own; she was the woman strenuously demanding her right to individual happiness.

"I understand it all," she repeated. "I understand every point. It was not Chance that made you change your identity, that made you care for me, that brought about—his death. I don't believe it was Chance; I believe it was something much higher. You are not meant to go away!"

As Loder watched her the remembrance of his first days as Chilcote rose again; the remembrance of how he had been dimly filled with the belief that below her self-possession lay a strength—a depth—uncommon in woman. As he studied her now, the instinctive belief flamed into conviction. "Eve!" he said involuntarily.

With a quick gesture she raised her head. "No!" she exclaimed. "No; don't say anything! You are going to see things as I see them—you must do so—you have no choice. No real man ever casts away the substance for the shadow!" Her eyes shone—the color, the glow, the vitality, rushed back into her face.

"John," she said, softly, "I love you—and I need you—but there is something with a greater claim—a greater need than mine. Don't you know what it is?"

He said nothing; he made no gesture.

"It is the party—the country. You may put love aside, but duty is different. You have pledged yourself. You are not meant to draw back."

Loder's lips parted.

"Don't!" she said again. "Don't say anything! I know all that is in your mind. But, when we sift things right through, it isn't my love — or our happiness — that's really in the balance. It is your future!" Her voice thrilled. "You are going to be a great man; and a great man is the property of his country. He has no right to individual action."

Again Loder made an effort to speak, but again she checked him.

"Wait!" she exclaimed. "Wait! You believe you have acted wrongly, and you are desperately afraid of acting wrongly again. But is it really truer, more loyal for us to work out a long probation in grooves that are already overfilled than to marry quietly abroad and fill the places that have need of us? That is the question I want you to answer. Is it really truer and nobler? Oh, I see the doubt that is in your mind! You think it finer to go away and make a new life than to live the life that is waiting you—because one is independent and the other means the use of another man's name and another man's money—that is the thought in your mind. But what is it that prompts that thought?" Again her voice caught, but her eyes did not falter. "I will tell you. It is not self-sacrifice—but pride!" She said the word fearlessly.

A flush crossed Loder's face. "A man requires pride," he said in a low voice.

"Yes, at the right time. But is this the right time? Is it ever right to throw away the substance for the shadow? You say that I don't understand—don't realize. I realize more tonight that I have realized in all my life. I know that you have an opportunity that can never come again—and that it's terribly possible to let it slip—"

She paused. Loder, his hands resting on the closed doors of the cab, sat very silent, with averted eyes and bent head.

"Only tonight," she went on, "you told me that everything was crying to you to take the easy, pleasant way. Then it was strong to turn aside; but now it is not strong. It is far nobler to fill an empty niche than to carve one for yourself. John—" She suddenly leaned forward, laying her hands over his. "Mr. Fraide told me tonight that in his new ministry my—my husband was to be Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs!"

The words fell softly. So softly that to ears less comprehending than Loder's their significance might have been lost—as his rigid attitude and unresponsive manner might have conveyed lack of understanding to any eyes less observant than Eve's.

For a long space there was no word spoken. At last, with a very gentle pressure, her fingers tightened over his hands.

"John—" she began, gently. But the word died away. She drew back into her seat, as the cab stopped before Chilcote's house.

Simultaneously as they descended the hall door was opened and a flood of warm light poured out reassuringly into the darkness.

"I thought it was your cab, sir," Crapham explained deferentially as they passed into the hall. "Mr. Fraide has been waiting to see you this half-hour. I showed him into the study." He closed the door softly and retired.

Then, in the warm light, amid the gravely dignified surroundings that had marked his first entry into this hazardous second existence, Eve turned to Loder for the verdict upon which the future hung.

As she turned, his face was still hidden from her, and his attitude betrayed nothing.

"John," she said, slowly, "you know why he is here. You know that he has come to personally offer you this place; to personally receive your refusal—or consent."

She ceased to speak; there was a moment of suspense; then Loder turned. His face was still pale and grave with the gravity of a man who has but recently been close to death, but beneath the gravity was another look—the old expression of strength and self-reliance, tempered, raised, and dignified by a new humility.

Moving forward, he held out his hands.

"My consent or refusal," he said, very quietly, "lies with—my wife."

THE END