

THE Masquerader

By KATHERINE CECIL THURSTON,
Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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CHAPTER III (Continued).

The imagination was pleasant while it lasted, but with him nothing was permanent. Of late the greater part of his sufferings had been comprised in the irritable fickleness of all his aims, the distaste for and impossibility of sustained effort in any direction. He had barely lighted a second cigarette when the old restlessness fell upon him. He stirred nervously in his seat, and the cigarette was scarcely burned out when he rose, paid his small bill and left the shop.

Outside on the pavement he halted, pulled out his watch and saw that two hours stretched in front before any appointment claimed his attention. He wondered vaguely where he might go to, what he might do, in those two hours. In the last few minutes a distaste for solitude had risen in his mind, giving the close street a loneliness that had escaped him before.

As he stood wavering a cab passed slowly down the street. The sight of a well dressed man roused the cabman. Flicking his whip, he passed Chilcote close, feigning to pull up.

The cab suggested civilization. Chilcote's mind veered suddenly, and he raised his hand. The vehicle stopped, and he climbed in.

"Where, sir?" The cabman peered down through the roof door.

Chilcote raised his head. "Oh, anywhere near Pall Mall," he said. Then, as the horse started forward, he put up his hand and shook the trapdoor. "Wait," he called. "I've changed my mind. Drive to Cadogan gardens, No. 33."

The distance to Cadogan Gardens was covered quickly. Chilcote had hardly realized that his destination was reached when the cab pulled up. Jumping out, he paid the fare and walked quickly to the hall door of No. 33.

"Is Lady Astrupp at home?" he asked sharply as the door swung back in answer to his knock.

The servant drew back deferentially. "Her ladyship has almost finished lunch, sir," he said.

For answer Chilcote stepped through the doorway and walked halfway across the hall.

"All right," he said. "But don't disturb her on my account. I'll wait in the white room till she has finished." And, without taking further notice of the servant, he began to mount the stairs.

In the room where he had chosen to wait a pleasant wood fire brightened the dull January afternoon and softened the thick white curtains, the gilt furniture and the venetian vases filled with white roses. Moving straight forward, Chilcote passed by the grate and stretched his hands to the blaze; then, with his usual instability, he turned and passed to a couch that stood a yard or two away.

On the couch, tucked away between a novel and a crystal gazing ball, was a white Persian kitten, fast asleep. Chilcote picked up the ball and held it between his eyes and the fire, then he laughed superciliously, tossed it back into its place and caught the kitten's tail. The little animal stirred, stretched itself and began to purr. At the same moment the door of the room opened.

Chilcote turned around. "I particularly said you were not to be disturbed," he began. "Have I merited displeasure?" He spoke fast, with the uneasy tone that so often underlain his words.

Lady Astrupp took his hand with a confiding gesture and smiled. "Never displeasure," she said lingeringly, and again she smiled. The smile might have struck a close observer as faintly artificial. But what man in Chilcote's frame of mind has time to be observant where women are concerned? The manner of the smile was very sweet and almost caressing, and that sufficed.

"What have you been doing?" she asked after a moment. "I thought I was quite forgotten." She moved across to the couch, picked up the kitten and kissed it. "Isn't this sweet?" she added.

She looked very graceful as she turned, holding the little animal up. She was a woman of twenty-seven, but she looked a girl. The outline of her face was pure, the pale gold of her hair almost ethereal, and her tall, slight figure still suggested the suppleness, the possibility of future development, that belong to youth. She wore a lace colored gown that harmonized with the room and with the delicacy of her skin.

"Now sit down and rest or walk about the room. I shan't mind which," she nestled into the couch and picked up the crystal ball.

"What is the toy for?" Chilcote looked at her from the mantelpiece, against which he was resting. He had never defined the precise attraction that Lillian Astrupp held for him. Her shallowness soothed him; her inconsequent egotism helped him to forget himself. She never asked him how he was, she never expected impossibilities. She let him come and go and act as he pleased, never demand-

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The touch was soothing, and he bore it patiently enough. After a moment she lifted the hand with a little exclamation of reproach.

"You degenerate person! You have ceased to manure. What has become of my excellent training?"

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"Changing identities," he said, with a touch of interest.

"Yes. One man is an artist, the other a millionaire. One wants to know what fame is like, the other wants to know how it feels to be really sinfully rich. So they exchange experiences for a month," she laughed.

Chilcote laughed as well. "But how?" he asked.

"Oh, I told you the idea was absurd. Fancy two people so much alike that neither their friends nor their servants see any difference! Such a thing couldn't be, could it?"

Chilcote looked down at the fire. "No," he said doubtfully. "No. I suppose not."

"Of course not. There are likenesses, but not freak likenesses like that."

"Chilcote's head was bent as he spoke, but at the last words he lifted it.

"By Jove! I don't know about that!" he said. "Not so very long ago I saw two men so much alike that I—I—"

He stopped.

Lillian smiled.

He colored quickly. "You doubt me?" he asked.

"My dear Jack! Her voice was delicately reproachful.

"Then you think that my imagination has been playing me tricks?"

"My dear boy! Nothing of the kind. Come back to your place and tell me the whole tale!" She smiled again, and patted the couch invitingly.

But Chilcote's balance had been upset. For the first time he saw Lillian as one of the watchful, suspicious crowd before which he was constantly on guard. Acting on the sensation, he moved suddenly toward the door.

"I have an appointment at the house," he said quickly. "I'll look in another day when I'm better company. I know I'm a bear today. My nerves, you know." He came back to the couch and took her hand. Then

he touched her cheek for an instant with his fingers.

"Goodbye," he said. "Take care of yourself—and the kitten," he added with forced gaiety, as he crossed the room.

That afternoon Chilcote's nervous condition reached its height. All day he had avoided the climax, but no evasion could be eternal, and this he realized as he sat in his place on the opposition benches during the half hour of wintry twilight that precedes the turning on of the lights. He realized it in that half hour, but the application of the knowledge followed later, when the time came for him to question the government on some point relating to the proposed additional dock at Taitley, the naval base. Then for the first time he knew that the sufferings of the past months could have a visible as well as a hidden side—could disorganize his daily routine as they had already demoralized his will and character.

The thing came upon him with extraordinary lack of preparation. He sat through the twilight with tolerable calm, his nervousness showing only in the occasional lifting of his hand to his collar and the frequent changing of his position, but when the lights were turned on and he leaned back in his seat with closed eyes he became conscious of a curious impression—a disturbing idea that through his closed lids he could see the faces on the opposite side of the house, see the rows of eyes, sleepy, interested or vigilant. Never before had the sensation pressed itself, but once set up it ran through all his susceptibilities. By an absurd freak of fancy those varying eyes seemed to pierce through his lids, almost through his eyeballs. The cold perspiration that was his daily horror broke out on his forehead, and at the same moment Fraide, his leader, turned, leaned over the back of his seat and touched his knee.

Chilcote started and opened his eyes. "I—I believe I was dozing," he said confusedly.

Fraide smiled his dry, kindly smile. "A fatal admission for a member of the opposition," he said. "But I was looking for you earlier in the day, Chilcote. There is something behind this Persian affair. I believe it to be a mere first move on Russia's part. You big trading people will find it worth watching."

Chilcote shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "I scarcely believe in it. Lately put a match to the powder in the St. George's, but 'twill only be a noise and a puff of smoke."

But Fraide did not smile. "What is the feeling down at Wark?" he asked. "Has it awakened any interest?"

"At Wark? Oh, I—I don't quite know. I have been a little out of touch with Wark in the last few weeks. A man has so many private affairs to look to."

He was uneasy under his chief's scrutiny.

Fraide's lips parted as if to make reply, but with a certain dignified reticence he closed them again and turned away.

Chilcote leaned back in his place and furtively passed his hand over his forehead. His mind was possessed by one consideration—the consideration of himself. He glanced down the crowded, lighted house to the big glass doors; he glanced about him at his colleagues, indifferent or interested; then surreptitiously his fingers strayed to his waistcoat pocket.

Usually he carried his morphia tablets with him, but today by a lapse of memory he had left them at home. He knew this, nevertheless he continued to search, while the need of the drug rushed through him with a sense of physical sickness. He lost hold on the business of the house; unconsciously he half rose from his seat.

The man next him looked up. "Hold your ground, Chilcote," he said. "Rayforth is drying up."

With a wave of relief Chilcote dropped back into his place. Whatever the confusion in his mind it was evidently not obvious in his face.

Presently the steps halted and he

Rayforth resumed his seat, there was the usual slight stir and pause; then Salett, the member for Salchester, rose.

With Salett's first words Chilcote's hand again sought his pocket, and again his eyes strayed toward the doors, but Fraide's erect head and stiff back just in front of him held him quiet. With an effort he pulled out his notes and smoothed them nervously; but, though his gaze was fixed on the pages, not a line of Salett's clear writing reached his mind. He glanced at the face of the speaker, then at the faces on the treasury bench, then once more he leaned back in his seat.

The man beside him saw the movement. "Fucking the dry dock?" he whispered jestingly.