

THE Masquerader

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

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CHAPTER XIII—(Continued)

"Nothing further. I didn't want you again tonight." He turned away as he spoke and moved toward the great door that was always kept ajar in Chilote's room. But as the door moved toward the door he wheeled back again. "Oh, one thing more. Remember! Bring me some sandwiches and a whisky." He remembered for the first time that he had eaten nothing since early afternoon.

A few minutes after 10 Loder left Chilote's room, resolutely descended the stairs and took up his position in the hall. Resolution is a strong word to apply to such a proceeding, but something in his bearing, in the attitude of his shoulders and head, instinctively suggested it.

Five or six minutes passed, but he waited without impatience. Then at last the sound of a carriage stopping before the house caused him to lift his head, and at the same instant Eve appeared at the head of the staircase.

She stood there for a second, looking down on him, her maid a pace or two behind holding her cloak. The picture she made struck upon his mind with something of a revolution.

On his first sight of her she had appeared to him as a strange blending of youth and self-possession—a girl with a woman's clearer perception of life. Later he had been drawn to study her in other respects—as a possible comrade and friend. Now for the first time he saw her as a power in her own world—a woman to whom no man could deny consideration. She looked taller for the distance between them, and the distinction of her carriage added to the effect. Her black gown was exquisitely soft—as soft as her black hair. Above her forehead was a cluster of splendid diamonds shaped like a coronet, and a band of the same stones encircled her neck. Loder realized in a glance that only the most distinguished of women could wear such ornaments and not have her beauty eclipsed. With a touch of the old awkwardness that had before assailed him in her presence, he came slowly forward as she descended the stairs.

"Can I help you with your cloak?" he asked, and as he asked it something like surprise at his own timidity crossed his mind.

For a second Eve's glance rested on his face. Her expression was quite impassive, but as she lowered her lashes a faint gleam flickered across her eyes. Nevertheless, her answer, when it came, was studiously courteous.

"Thank you," she said, "but Marie will do all I want."

Loder looked at her for a moment, then turned aside. He was not hurt by her rebuff. Rather, he was interested in the sequence of impressions, he was stirred by it. The pride that had refused Chilote's help, and the self-control that had refused to admit him to her presence, he understood and appreciated both by the light of personal experience.

"The carriage is waiting, sir," Crap-ham's voice broke in.

Loder nodded, and Eve turned to her maid. "That will do, Marie," she said. "I shall wait a cup of chocolate when I get back, probably at 1 o'clock." She drew her cloak about her shoulders and moved toward the door. Then she paused and looked back. "Shall we start?" she asked quietly.

Loder, still watching her, came forward at once. "Certainly," he said, with unusual gentleness.

He followed her as she crossed the footpath, but made no further offer of help, and when the moment came he quietly took his place beside her in the carriage. His last impression as the horses wheeled round was of the open hall door—Crap-ham in his soubert livery and the maid in her black dress, both silhouetted against the dark background of the hall; then as the carriage moved forward smoothly and rapidly he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

During the first few moments of the drive there was silence. To Loder there was a strange, new sensation in this companionship, so close and yet so distant. He was so near to Eve that the slight fragrant scent from her clothes might almost have belonged to his own. The impression was confusing, yet vaguely delightful. It was years since he had been so close to a woman of his own class, his own caste. He acknowledged the thought with a curious sense of pleasure, involuntarily he turned and looked at her.

She was sitting very straight, her fine profile out clear against the carriage window, her diamonds quivering in the light that flashed by them from the street. For a space the sense of unreality that had pervaded his first entrance into Chilote's life touched him again; then another and more potent feeling rose to quell it. Almost involuntarily as he looked at her his lips parted.

"May I say something?" he asked.

Eve remained motionless. She did not turn her head, as most women would have done. "Say anything you like," she said gravely.

"Anything?" He bent a little nearer.

Again he bent again by the inordinate wish to dominate.

"Of course."

It seemed to him that her voice sounded forced and a little tired. For a moment he looked through the window at the passing lights, then slowly his gaze returned to her face.

"You look very beautiful tonight," he said. His voice was low and his manner unassuming, but his words had the effect he desired.

She turned her head, and her eyes met his in a glance of curiosity and surprise.

Slight as the triumph was, it thrilled him. The small scene with Chilote's maid came back to him, his own personal determination to make his own voice heard. Lending forward, he laid his hand lightly on her arm.

"Eve," he said quickly—"Eve, do you remember?" Then he paused and withdrew his hand. The horses had quickened speed, then stopped altogether as the carriage fell into line outside Bramfell house.

CHAPTER XIV

Loder entered Lady Bramfell's sitting room, feeling far more like an actor in a drama than an ordinary man in a peculiar situation. It was the first time he had played Chilote to a purely social audience and the first time for many years that he had rubbed shoulders with a well-dressed crowd ostensibly brought together for amusement. As he followed Eve along the corridor that led to the reception rooms he questioned the reality of the position again and again.

Then abruptly, at the moment when the sensation of familiarity was strongest, a cheery voice hailed him, and, turning, he saw the square shoulders, light eyes and pointed mustache of Lakelley, the owner of the St. George's Gazette.

At the sight of the man and the sound of his greeting his doubts and speculations vanished. The essentials of life rose again to the position they had occupied three weeks ago, in the short but strenuous period when his dormant activities had been stirred and he had recognized his true self. He lifted his head unconsciously, the shade of misgiving that had crossed his countenance passing from him as he smiled at Lakelley with a keen, alert pleasure that altered his whole face.

Eve, looking back, saw the expression. It attracted and held her like a sudden glimpse into a secret room. In all the years of her marriage, in the months of her courtship even, she had never surprised the look on Lakelley's face. The impression came quickly and with it a strange, warm rush of interest that receded slowly, leaving an odd sense of loneliness. But, at the moment that the feeling came and passed, her attention was claimed in another direction. A slight, fair-haired boy forced his way toward her through the press of people that filled the corridor.

"Mrs. Chilote?" he exclaimed. "Can I believe my luck in finding you alone?" Eve laughed. It seemed that there was relief in her laugh. "How absurd you are, Bobby," she said kindly. "But you are wrong. My husband is here. I am waiting for him."

Blessington looked around. "Oh," he said. "Indeed?" Then he relaxed into silence. He was the soul of good nature, but those who knew him best knew that Chilote's summary change of secretaries had rankled. Eve, conscious of the little jar, made haste to smooth it away.

"Tell me about yourself," she said.

"What have you been doing?" Blessington looked at her, then smiled again, his buoyancy restored. "Doing?" he said. "Oh, calling every other afternoon at Grosvenor square, only to find that a certain lady is never at home."

At his tone Eve laughed again. The boy, with his frank and ingenuous nature, had beguiled many a dull hour for her in past days, and she had missed him not a little when his face had been filled by Greening.

"But I mean seriously, Bobby. Has something good turned up?"

Blessington made a very face. "Something is on its way. That's why I'm on duty tonight. Old Bramfell and the pater are working it between them, so if Lady Bramfell or Lady Astrupp happen to drop a fan or a handkerchief this evening I've got to be here to pick it up. See?"

"As you picked up my fan and handkerchiefs last year and the year before?" Eve smiled.

Blessington's face suddenly looked grave. "I wish you hadn't said that," he said. Then he passed abruptly. Out of the hum of talk behind them a man's laugh sounded. It was not loud, but it was a laugh that one seldom hears in a London drawing room. It expressed interest, amusement and in an inexplicable way it seemed also to express strength.

Eve and Blessington both turned involuntarily.

"By Jove," said Blessington.

Eve said nothing.

Loder was parting with Lakelley and his was the laugh that had attracted them both. The interest excited by his talk was still reflected in his face and bearing as he made his way toward them.

"By Jove," said Blessington again.

"I never realized this—"

Again Eve said nothing. But silently and with a more subtle meaning she found herself echoing the words.

Until he was close to her Loder did not seem to see her. Then he stopped quietly.

"I was speaking to Lakelley," he said. "He wants me to dine with him one night at Cadogan gardens."

But Eve was silent, waiting for him to address Blessington. She glanced at him quickly, but though their eyes met he did not catch the meaning that lay in hers. It was a difficult moment. She had known him incredibly, almost unparadoxically absentminded, but it had invariably been when he was suffering from nerves, as she phrased it to herself. But tonight he was obviously in the possession of undivided faculties. She colored slightly and glanced under her lashes at Blessington.

Had the same idea struck him, she wondered? But he was studiously studying a suit of Chinese armor that stood close by in a niche of the wall.

"Bobby has been helping me amuse myself while you talked to Mr. Lakelley," she said pointedly.

Directly addressed, Loder turned and looked at Blessington. "How do you do?" he said, with doubtful cordiality. The name of Bobby conveyed nothing to him.

To his surprise Eve looked annoyed and Blessington's fresh colored face deepened in tone. With a slow, uncomfortable sensation he was aware of having struck a wrong note.

There was a short, unpleasant pause. Then, more by intuition than actual sight, Blessington saw Eve's eyes turn from him to Loder, and with quick tact he saved the situation.

"How do you do, sir?" he responded, with a smile. "I congratulate you on looking so—so uncommon well. I was just telling Mrs. Chilote that I hold a commission for Lady Astrupp tonight. I'm a sort of scout at present—reporting on the outposts." He spoke fast and without much meaning, but his boyish voice eased the strain.

Eve thanked him with a smile. "Then we mustn't interfere with a person on active service," she said.

She half paused and turned toward him. "Yes?" she said, and he wondered if it was his imagination that made the word sound slightly eager.

"About that matter of Blessington," he began, then he stopped. Bramfell had reached them.

The little man came up smiling and with an outstretched hand. "There's no penalty for separating husband and wife," he said.

As he moved aside Bramfell looked at Loder. "Well, Chilote, have you dipped into the future yet?" he asked with a laugh.

Loder echoed the laugh, but said nothing. In his uncertainty at the question he reverted to his old resource of silence.

Bramfell raised his eyebrows. "What?" he said. "Don't tell me that my sister-in-law hasn't engaged you as a victim?" Then he turned to Eve's direction. "You've heard of our new departure, Mrs. Chilote?"

Eve looked round from the lively group by which she was surrounded. "Lillian's crystal gazing? Why, of course," she said. "She should make a very beautiful seer. We are all quite curious."

Bramfell pursed up his lips. "She has a very beautiful tent at the end of the conservatory. It took five men as many days to rig it up. We could not bear ourselves talk for hammering. My wife said it made her feel quite philanthropic, it reminded her so much of a charity bazaar."

Everybody laughed, and at the same moment Blessington came quickly across the room and joined the group.

"Hello!" he said. "Anybody seen Witcheaton? He's next on my list for the crystal business."

Again the whole party laughed, and Bramfell, stepping forward, touched Blessington's arm in mock seriousness.

"Witcheaton is playing bridge, like a sensible man," he said. "Leave him in peace, Bobby."

Blessington made a comical grimace. "But I'm working this on commercial principles," he said. "I keep the list, names and hours complete, and Lady Astrupp gazes in blissful ignorance as to who her victims are. The whole thing is great, simple and statistical."

"For goodness' sake, Bobby, shut up!" Bramfell's round eyes were twinkling with amusement.

"But my system?"

"Systems? Ah, we all had them when we were as young as you are?"

"And they all had laws, Bobby." Eve broke in. "We were always finding gaps that had to be filled up. Never mind about Lord Witcheaton. Get a substitute. It won't count if Lillian doesn't know."

Blessington watered as she spoke. His eyes wandered round the party and again rested on Bramfell.

"Not me, Bobby! Remember, I've breathed crystals—practically lived on them—for the last week. Now, there's Chilote!" Again his eyes twinkled.

All eyes were turned on Loder, though one or two strayed surreptitiously to Eve. She, seeming sensitive to the position, laughed quickly.

"A very good idea," she said. "Who wants to see the future if not a politician?"

Loder glanced from her to Blessington. Then, with a very feminine impulse, she settled the matter beyond dispute.

"Please use your authority, Bobby," she said. "And when you've got me back to me, I'll see you've had a talk."

She nodded and smiled, then instantly turned to Bramfell with some trivial remark.

For a second Loder waited; then, with a movement of resignation, he laid his hand on Blessington's arm.

"Very well," he said. "But if my fate is black, witness it was my wife who sent me to it." His faint pause on the word wife, the mention of the word itself in the presence of these people, had a savor of recklessness. The small discomfiture of his earlier slip vanished

before it. He experienced a strong reaction of confidence in his luck. With a cool head, a steady step and a friendly pressure of the fingers on Blessington's arm, he allowed himself to be drawn across the reception rooms, through the long corridors and down the broad flight of steps that led to the conservatory.

The conservatory was a feature of the Bramfell town house, and to Loder it came as something wonderful and unlooked for, with its clustering green branches, its slight, unobtrusive scents, its temperate pleasant atmosphere. He felt no wish to speak as, still guided by Blessington, he passed down the shadowy paths that in the half light had the warmth and mystery of a southern garden. Here and there from the darkness came the whispering of a voice or the sound of a laugh, bringing with it the necessary touch of life. Otherwise the place was still.

Absorbed by the air of solitude, contrasting so remarkably with the noise and crowded glitter left behind in the reception rooms, he had moved half-way down the long green aisle before the business in hand came back to him with a sudden sense of annoyance. It seemed so pithy to mar the quiet of the place with the absurdity of a side show. He turned to Blessington with a touch of abruptness.

"What am I expected to do?" he asked.

Blessington looked up, surprised. "Why, I thought, sir—" he began; then he instantly altered his tone. "Oh, just enter into the spirit of the thing. Lady Astrupp won't put much strain on your credulity, but she'll make a big call on your solemnity." He laughed.

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As he moved aside Bramfell looked at Loder. "Well, Chilote, have you dipped into the future yet?" he asked with a laugh.

With a sense of satisfaction he sat the chair forward and sat down.

Then for the first time he saw that on the other side of the game partition and below it by a few inches was a small table of polished wood, on which stood an ornate, a crystal ball and a gold dish filled with tea. These were arranged on the side of the table nearest to him, the farther side being out of his range of vision. An amused interest touched him as he made his position more comfortable. Whoever this woman was, she knew how to marshal her effects. He found himself waiting with some curiosity for the next injunction from behind the curtain.

"The art of crystal gazing," began the sweet, slow voice after a pause. "Is one of the oldest known arts." Loder sat forward. The thought of Lady Bramfell's dimpled discomfiture with some other thought more distant and less easy to secure.

"To obtain the best results," went on the voice, "the subject lays his uncovered hands outspread upon a smooth surface." It was evident that the invisible priestess was reading from the open book, for when the word "surface" was reached there was a slight stir that indicated the changing of position, and when the voice came again it was in a different tone.

"Please lay your hands, palms downward, upon the table."

Loder smiled to himself in the darkness. He pictured Chilote with his nerves and his impatience going through this ordeal; then in good but muted silence he leaned forward and obeyed the command. His hands rested on the smooth surface of the table in the bar of light from the unseen lamp.

There was a second in which the seer was silent; then he fancied that she raised her head.

"You must take off your rings," she said smoothly. "Any metal interferes with the sympathetic current."

At any other time Loder would have laughed, but the request so casually and graciously made sent all possibilities of irony far into the background.

The thought of Chilote and of the one law in their otherwise lawless scheme rose to his mind. Instinctively he withdrew his hands.

"Where is the sympathetic current?" he asked quietly. His thoughts were busy with the question of whether he would or would not be justified in beating an undignified retreat.

"Between you and me, of course," said