

THE Masquerader

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

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CHAPTER XXV—(Continued.)

Like a match to a train of powder the words set flame to the excitement that had smoldered for weeks, and in an atmosphere of stirring activity, a scene of such tense and vital concentration as the house has rarely witnessed, he found inspiration for his great achievement.

To give Loder's speech in mere words would be little short of futile. The gift of oratory is too illustrious, too much a matter of eye and voice and individuality, to allow of cold reproduction. To those who heard him speak on that night of April 18 the speech will require no recalling, and to those who did not hear him there would be no substitute in bare reproduction.

In the moment of action it mattered nothing to him that his previous preparations were to a great extent rendered useless by this news that had come with such paralyzing effect. In the sweeping consciousness of his own ability he found added joy in the freedom it opened up. He ceased to consider that by fate he was a Conservative, bound by traditional conventions.

In that great moment he knew himself sufficiently a man to exercise whatever individuality instinct prompted. He forgot the didactic methods by which he had proposed to show knowledge of his subject, both as a past and a future factor in European politics. With his own strong appreciation of present things he saw and grasped the vast present interest lying beneath his hand.

For fifty minutes he held the interest of the house, speaking insistently, fearlessly, commandingly on the immediate need of action. He unhesitatingly pointed out that the news which had just reached England was not so much an appalling fact as a sinister warning to those in whose keeping lay the safety of the country's interests. Lastly, with a fine touch of eloquence, he paid tribute to the steadfast fidelity of such men as Sir William Bree-Field, who, whatever political complications arise at home, pursue their duty unwaveringly in the outposts of the empire.

At his last words there was silence—the silence that marks a genuine orator's triumph.

It was one of those stupendous bursts of feeling that no etiquette, no decorum, is powerful enough to quell. As he resumed his seat, very pale, but exalted as men are exalted only once or twice in a lifetime, it rose about him—clamorous, spontaneous, undeniable. Near at hand were the faces of his party, excited and triumphant; across the house were the faces of Seaborough and his ministry, uncomfortable and disturbed. The tumult swelled, then fell away, and in the partial lull that followed Fraide leaned over the back of his seat. His quiet, dignified expression was unaltered, but his eyes were intensely bright.

"Chilcote," he whispered, "I don't congratulate you or myself. I congratulate the country on possessing a great man."

The remaining features of the debate followed quickly one upon the other. The electric atmosphere of the house possessed a strong incentive power. Immediately Loder's oration had subsided, the undersecretary for foreign affairs rose and in a careful and noncommittal reply defended the attitude of the government.

Next came Fraide, who, in one of his rare and polished speeches, touched with much feeling upon his personal grief at the news reported from Persia and made emphatic indorsement of Loder's words.

Following Fraide came one or two dissentient Liberals, and then Seaborough himself closed the debate. His speech was masterly and fluent; but, though any disquietude he may have felt was well disguised under a tone of reassuring ease, the attempt to rehabilitate his position—already weakened in more than one direction—was a task beyond his strength.

Amid extraordinary excitement the division followed, and with it a government defeat.

It was not until half an hour after the votes had been taken that Loder, freed at last from persistent congratulations, found opportunity to look for Eve. In accordance with a promise made that morning he was to find her waiting outside the ladies' gallery at the close of the debate.

Disengaging himself from the group of men who had surrounded and followed him down the lobby, he discarded the lift and ran up the narrow staircase. Reaching the landing, he went forward hurriedly. Then with a certain abrupt movement he paused. In the doorway leading to the gallery Eve was waiting for him. The place was not brightly lighted, and she was standing in the shadow, but it needed only a glance to assure his recognition. He could almost have seen in the dark that night, so vivid were his perceptions. He took a step toward her, then again he stopped. In a second glance he realized that her eyes were bright with tears, and it was with the strangest sensation he had ever experienced that the knowledge flashed upon him. Here also he had struck the same note—the

long coveted nose supremacy. It and rung out full and clear as he stood in Chilcote's place dominating the house. It had besieged him clamorously as he passed along the lobbies amid a sea of friendly hands and voices; now in the quiet of the deserted gallery it came home to him with deeper meaning from the eyes of Chilcote's wife.

Without a thought he put out his hands and caught hers. "I couldn't get away," he said. "I'm afraid I'm very late."

With a smile that scattered her tears, Eve looked up. "Are you?" she said, laughing a little. "I don't know what the time is. I scarcely know whether it's night or day."

Still holding one of her hands, he drew her down the stairs, but as they reached the last step she released her fingers.

"In the carriage," she said, with an other little laugh of nervous happiness. At the foot of the stairs they were surrounded. Men whose faces Loder barely knew crowded about him. The intoxication of excitement was still in the air—the instinct that a new force had made itself felt, a new epoch been entered upon, stirred prophetically in every mind.

Passing through the enthusiastic concourse of men, they came unexpected by upon Fraide and Lady Sarah surrounded by a group of friends. The old statesman came forward instantly and, taking Loder's arm, walked with him to Chilcote's waiting brougham. He said little as they slowly made their way to the carriage, but the pressure of his fingers was tense and an unwonted color showed in his face. When Eve and Loder had taken their seats, he stepped to the edge of the curb. They were alone for the mo-



ment, and, leaning close to the carriage, he put his hand through the open window. In silence he took Eve's fingers and held them in a long, affectionate pressure; then he released them and took Loder's hand.

"Good night, Chilcote," he said. "You have proved yourself worthy of her. Good night." He turned quickly and rejoined his waiting friends. In another second the horses had wheeled round, and Eve and Loder were carried swiftly forward into the darkness.

In the great moments of man's life woman comes before—and after. Some shadow of this truth was in Eve's mind as she lay back in her seat, with closed eyes and parted lips. It seemed that life came to her now for the first time—came in the glad, proud, satisfying tide of things accomplished. This was her hour, and the recognition of it brought the blood to her face in a sudden happy rush. There had been no need to precipitate its coming; it had been ordained from the first.

Whether she desired it or no, whether she strove to draw it nearer or strove to ward it off, its coming had been inevitable. She opened her eyes suddenly and looked out into the darkness, the darkness throbbing with multitudes of lives, all waiting, all desiring fulfillment. She was no longer lonely, no longer alone. She was kin with all this pitiful, admirable, shining, loving humanity. Again tears of pride and happiness filled her eyes. Then suddenly the thing she had waited for came to pass.

Loder leaned close to her. She was conscious of his nearer presence, of his strong, masterful personality. With a thrill that caught her breath she felt his arm about her shoulder and heard the sound of his voice.

"Eve," he said, "I love you. Do you understand? I love you." And drawing her close to him, he bent and kissed her.

With Loder, to do was to do fully. When he gave, he gave generously; when he swept aside a barrier, he left no stone standing. He had been slow to recognize his capacities, slower still to recognize his feelings. But now that the knowledge came he received it openly. In this matter of newly comprehended love he gave no thought to

either past or future. That they loved and were alone was all he knew or questioned. She was as much Eve—the one woman—as though they were together in the primeval garden, and in that spirit he claimed her.

He neither spoke nor behaved extravagantly in that great moment of comprehension. He acted quietly, with the completeness of purpose that he gave to everything. He had found a new capacity within himself, and he was strong enough to dread no weakness in displaying it.

Holding her close to him, he repeated his declaration again and again, as though repetition ratified it. He found no need to question her feeling for him—he had divined it in a flash of inspiration as she stood waiting in the doorway of the gallery, but his own surrender was a different matter.

As the carriage passed around the corner of Whitehall and dipped into the traffic of Piccadilly he bent down again until her soft hair brushed his face, and the warm personal contact, the slight, fresh smell of violets so suggestive of her presence, stirred him afresh.

"Eve," he said vehemently, "do you understand? Do you know that I have loved you always—from the very first?" As he said it he bent still nearer, kissing her lips, her forehead, her hair.

At the same moment the horses slackened speed and then stopped, arrested by one of the temporary blocks that so often occur in the traffic of Piccadilly circus.

Loder, preoccupied by his own feelings, scarcely noticed the halt, but Eve drew away from him, laughing.

"You mustn't," she said softly. "Look."

The carriage had stopped beside one of the small islands that intersect the place. A group of pedestrians were crowded upon it, under the light of the electric lamp—wayfarers who, like themselves, were awaiting a passage. Loder took a cursory glance at them, then turned back to Eve.

"What are they, after all, but men and women?" he said. "They're understood—every one of them." He laughed in his turn. Nevertheless he drew her arm. Her feminine thought for conventionalities appealed to him. It was an acknowledgment of dependency.

For awhile they sat silent, the light of the street lamp flickering through the glass of the window, the hum of voices and traffic coming to them in a continuous rise and fall of sound. At first the position was interesting, but as the seconds followed each other it became irksome. Loder, watching the varying expressions of Eve's face, grew impatient of the delay, grew suddenly eager to be alone again in the fragrant darkness.

Impulsed by the desire, he leaned forward and opened the window.

"Let's end the meeting of this," he said. "Is there nobody to regulate the traffic?" As he spoke he saw Eve and leaned out of the window. There was a touch of imperious suavity in his manner. From the position of power, there was something irksome in this commonplace check to his desires.

"Isn't it possible to get out of this?" Eve heard him call to the coachman. Then she heard no more.

He had leaned out of the carriage with the intention of looking onward toward the cause of the delay. Instead, by that magnetic attraction that undoubtedly exists, he looked directly in front of him at the group of people waiting on the little island—at one man who leaned against the lamp post in an attitude of apathy—a man with a pallid, unshaven face and lusterless eyes, who wore a cap drawn low over his forehead.

He looked at this man, and the man saw and returned his glance. For a space that seemed interminable they held each other's eyes; then very slowly Loder drew back into the carriage.

As he dropped into his seat Eve glanced at him anxiously.

"John," she said, "has anything happened? You look ill."

He turned to her and tried to smile. "It's nothing," he said. "Nothing to worry about." He spoke quickly, but his voice had suddenly become flat. All the command, all the domination, had dropped away from it.

Eve bent close to him, her face lighting up with anxious tenderness. "It was the excitement," she said, "the strain of tonight."

He looked at her, but he made no attempt to press the fingers that clasped his own.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Yes. It was the excitement of tonight—and the reaction."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE next morning at 8 o'clock, and again without breakfast, Loder covered the distance between Grosvenor square and Chilcote's inn. He left Chilcote's house hastily—with a haste that only an urgent motive could have driven him to adopt. His steps were quick and unimpeded as he traversed the intervening streets; his shoulders lacked their decisive pose, and his pale face was marked with shadows beneath the eyes—shadows that bore witness to the sleepless night spent in pacing Chilcote's vast and lonely room. By the curious effect of circumstances the likeness between the two men had never been more significantly marked than on that morning of April 19, when Loder walked along the pavements crowded with early workers and brisk with insistent news vendors already alive to the value of last night's political crisis.

The irony of this last element in the day's concerns came to him fully when one newsboy, more energetic than his fellows, thrust a paper in front of him. "Sensation in the 'ouse, sir! Speech

by Mr. Chilcote! Government defeat!"

For a moment Loder stopped and his face reddened. The tide of emotions still ran strong. His hand went instinctively to his pocket; then his lips set. He shook his head and walked on.

With the same hard expression about his mouth, he turned into Chilcote's inn, passed through his own doorway and mounted the stairs.

This time there was no milk can on the threshold of his rooms and the door yielded to his pressure without the need of a key. With a strange sensation of reluctance he walked into the narrow passage and paused, uncertain which room to enter first. As he stood hesitating a voice from the sitting room settled the question.

"Who's there?" it called irritably. "What do you want?"

Without further ceremony the intruder pushed the door open and entered the room. As he did so he drew a quick breath—whether of disappointment or relief it was impossible to say. Whether he had hoped for or dreaded it, Chilcote was conscious.

As Loder entered he was sitting by the cheerless grate, the ashes of yesterday's fire showing charred and dreary where the sun touched them. His back was to the light, and about his shoulders was an old plaid rug. Behind him on the table stood a cup, a teapot and the can of milk; farther off a kettle was set to boil upon a tiny spirit stove.

In all strong situations we are more or less commonplace. Loder's first remark as he glanced round the disordered room seemed strangely inefficient.

"Where's Robins?" he asked in a brusque voice. His mind teemed with big considerations, yet this was his first involuntary question.

Chilcote had started at the entrance of his visitor; now he sat staring at him, his hands holding the arms of his chair.

"Where's Robins?" Loder asked again.

"I don't know. She— I— We did not hit it off. She's gone—went yesterday." He shivered and drew the rug about him.

"Chilcote"—Loder began sternly. Then he paused. There was something in the other's look and attitude that arrested him. A change of expression passed over his own face. He turned about, with an abrupt gesture, pulled off his coat and threw it on a chair; then, crossing deliberately to the fireplace, he began to rake the ashes from the grate.

Within a few minutes he had a fire crackling where the bed of dead cinders had been, and, having finished the task, he rose slowly from his knees, wiped his hands and crossed to the table. On the small spirit stove the kettle had boiled, and the cover was lifting and falling with a fluttering sound. Raising out the flame, Loder picked up the teapot and, with hands that were almost unsteady, poured the tea. For a moment he stared at the teacup, and then he turned to the table, set about making the tea.

During the whole operation he never spoke, though all the while he was fully conscious of Chilcote's puzzled gaze. The tea ready, he poured it into the cup and carried it across the room.

"Drink this," he said laconically. "The fire will be up presently."

Chilcote extended a cold and shaky hand. "You see"—he began.

But Loder checked him almost savagely. "I do—as well as though I had followed you from Piccadilly last night. You've been hanging about, God knows where, till the small hours of the morning; then you've come back—slunk back, starving for your infernal poison and shivering with cold. You've set the first part of the business, but the cold has still to be reckoned with. Drink the tea. I've something to say to you." He mastered his vehemence and, walking to the window, stood looking down into the court. His eyes were blank, his face hard; his ears heard nothing but the faint sound of Chilcote's swallowing, the click of the cup against his teeth.

For a time that seemed interminable he stood motionless; then, when he judged the tea finished, he turned slowly. Chilcote had drawn closer to the fire. He was obviously braced by the warmth, and the apathy that rung about him was to some extent dispelled. Still moving slowly, Loder went toward him and, relieving him of the empty cup, stood looking down at him.

"Chilcote," he said very quietly, "I've come to tell you that the thing must end."

After he spoke there was a prolonged pause; then, as if shaken with sudden consciousness, Chilcote rose. The rug dropped from one shoulder and hung down indelicately; his hand caught the back of the chair for support; his unshaven face looked absurd and repulsive in its sudden expression of scared inquiry. Loder involuntarily turned away.

"I mean it," he said slowly. "It's over; we've come to the end."

"But why?" Chilcote articulated blankly. "Why? Why?" In his confusion he could think of no better word.

"Because I throw it up. My side of the bargain's off."

Again Chilcote's lips parted stammeringly. The apathy caused by physical exhaustion and his recently administered drug was passing from him; the hopelessly shattered condition of mind and body was showing through it like a skeleton through a thin covering of flesh.

"But why?" he said again. "Why?" Still Loder avoided the frightened surmise of his eyes. "Because I withdraw," he answered doggedly.

Then suddenly Chilcote's tongue was loosened. "Loder," he cried excitedly, "you can't do it! Great heavens, man, you can't do it! To reassure himself he laughed—a painfully thin echo of his old sarcastic laugh. "If it's a matter of greater opportunity," he began, "of more money—"

But Loder turned upon him.

"Be quiet!" he said so menacingly that the other stopped. Then by an effort he conquered himself. "It's not a matter of money, Chilcote," he said quietly. "It's a matter of necessity." He brought the word out with difficulty.

Chilcote glanced up. "Necessity?" he repeated. "How? Why?"

The reiteration roused Loder. "Because there was a great scene in the house last night," he began hurriedly. "Because when you go back you'll find that Seaborough has smashed up over the assassination of Sir William Bree-Field at Meshed and that you have made your mark in a big speech, and because—" Abruptly he stopped. The thing he had come to say—the thing he had meant to say—would not be said. Either his tongue or his resolution failed him, and for the instant he stood as silent and almost as ill at ease as his companion. Then all at once inspiration came to him, in the suggestion of a well-nigh forgotten argument by which he might influence Chilcote and save his own self respect. "It's all over, Chilcote," he said more quietly. "It has run itself out." And in a dozen sentences he sketched the story of Lillian Astrupp, her past relations with himself, her present suspicions. It was not what he had meant to say; it was not what he had come to say, but it served the purpose—it saved him humiliation.

Chilcote listened to the last word. Then, as the other finished, he dropped nervously back into his chair. "Good heavens, man," he said, "why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you warn me, instead of filling my mind with your political position? Your political position!" He laughed unsteadily. The long spells of indulgence that had weakened his already maimed faculties showed in the laugh, in the sudden breaking of his voice. "You must do something, Loder!" he added nervously, checking his amusement. "You must do something!"

Loder looked down at him. "No," he said decisively. "It's your turn now. It's your own fault. You've got to do something."

Chilcote's face turned a shade grayer. "I can't," he said below his breath.

"Can't? Oh, yes, you can. We can all do anything. It's not too late; there's just sufficient time. Chilcote," he added suddenly, "don't you see that the thing has been maddest all along—has been like playing with the most infernal explosives? You may thank whatever you have faith in that no-

body has been smashed up! You are going back. Do you understand me? You are going back—now, today, before it's too late." There was a great change in Loder; his strong, imperious face was stirred; he was moved in both voice and manner.

Time after time he repeated his injunction, reasoning, expostulating, insisting. It almost seemed that he fought some greivous invisible force rather than the shattered man before him.

Chilcote moved nervously in his seat. It was the first real clash of personalities. He felt it recognized it by instinct. The sense of domination had fallen on him; he knew himself impotent in the other's hands. Whatever he might attempt in moments of solitude he possessed no voice in presence of this invincible second self. For awhile he struggled—he did not fight, he struggled to resist—then, lifting his eyes, he met Loder's. "And what will you do?" he said weakly.

Loder returned his questioning gaze, but almost immediately he turned aside. "I?" he said. "Oh, I shall leave London."

CHAPTER XXVII.

BT Loder did not leave London, and the hour of 2 on the day following his dismissal of Chilcote found him again in his sitting room.

He sat at the center table surrounded by a cloud of smoke; a pipe was between his lips and the morning's newspapers lay in a heap beside his elbow. To the student of humanity his attitude was intensely interesting. It was the attitude of a man trampled by the knowledge of his strength. Before him as he sat smoking stretched a future of absolute nothingness, and toward this blank future one portion of his consciousness—a struggling and as yet scarcely sentient portion—pushed him inevitably; while another—a vigorous, persistent, human portion—cried to him to pause. So actual, so clamorous, was this silent mental combat that had raged unceasingly since the moment of his renunciation that at last in physical response to it he pushed back his chair.

"It's too late," he said aloud. "I'm a fool. It's too late."

Then abruptly, astonishingly, as though in direct response to his spoken thought, the door opened and Chilcote walked into the room.

Slowly Loder rose and stared at him. The feeling he acknowledged to himself was anger, but below the anger a very different sensation ran riotously strong. And it was in time to this second feeling, this sudden, lawless joy, that his pulses beat as he turned a cold face on the intruder.

"Well?" he said sternly.

But Chilcote was impervious to sternness. He was mentally shaken and distressed, though outwardly irreproachable, even to the violets in the lapel of his coat—the violets that for a week past had been brought each morning to the door of Loder's rooms by Eve's maid. For one second, as Loder's eyes rested on the flowers, a sting of ungenerous jealousy shot through him; then as suddenly it died away, superseded by another feeling—a feeling of new, spontaneous joy. Worn by Chilcote or by himself, the flowers were a symbol!

"Well?" he said again in a gentler voice.

Chilcote had walked to the table and

laid down his hat. His face was white and the muscles of his lips twitched nervously as he drew off his gloves.

"Thank heaven, you're here!" he said shortly. "Give me something to drink."

In silence Loder brought out the whisky and set it on the table; then instinctively he turned aside. As plainly as though he saw the action he mentally figured Chilcote's furtive glance, the furtive movement of his fingers to his waistcoat pocket, the hasty dropping of the tabloids into the glass. For an instant the sense of his tacit connivance came to him sharply; the next, he flung it from him. The human, inner voice was whispering its old watchword. The strong man has no time to waste over his weaker brother!

When he heard Chilcote lay down his tumbler he looked back again. "Well, what is it?" he said. "What have you come for?" He strove resolutely to keep his voice severe but, try as he might, he could not quite subdue the eager force that lay behind his words. Once, again, as on the night of their second interchange, life had become a phoenix, rising to fresh existence even while he sifted its ashes. "Well?" he said once again.

Chilcote had set down his glass. He was nervously passing his handkerchief across his lips. There was something in the gesture that attracted Loder. Looking at him more attentively, he saw what his own feelings and the other's conventional dress had blinded him to—the almost piteous panic and excitement in his visitor's eyes.

"Something's gone wrong?" he said, with abrupt intuition.

Chilcote started. "Yes—no—that is, yes," he stammered.

Loder moved around the table. "Something's gone wrong," he repeated, "and you've come to tell me."

The tone unnerved Chilcote. He suddenly dropped into a chair. "It—It wasn't my fault!" he began. "I—I have had a horrible time!"

Loder's lips tightened. "Yes," he said, "yes, I understand."

The other glanced up with a gleam of his old suspicion. "Twas all my nerves, Loder!"

"Of course. Yes, of course." Loder's interruption was curt.

Chilcote eyed him doubtfully. Then recollection took the place of doubt, and a change passed over his expression. "It wasn't my fault," he began hastily. "On my soul, it wasn't! It was Crapham's beastly fault for showing her into the morning room!"

Loder kept silent. His curiosity had flared into sudden life at the other's words, but he feared to break the shattered train of thought even by a word.

In the silence Chilcote moved uneasily. "You see," he went on at last, "when I was here with you I—I felt strong. I—I— He stopped.

"Yes, yes. When you were here with me you felt strong."

"Yes, that's it. While I was here I felt I could do the thing. But when I went home—when I went up to my rooms"—Again he paused, passing his handkerchief across his forehead.

"When you went up to your rooms?" Loder strove hard to keep his control.

"To my room?— Oh, I—I forgot about that. I forgot about the night!" He hesitated confusedly. "All I remember is the coming down to breakfast next morning—this morning—at 12 o'clock!"

Loder turned to the table and poured himself out some whisky. "Yes," he acquiesced in a very quiet voice.

At the word Chilcote rose from his seat. His disquietude was very evident. "Oh, there was breakfast on the table when I came downstairs—breakfast with flowers and a horrible, dazzling glare of sun. It was then, Loder, as I stood and looked into the room, that the impossibility of it all came to me—that I knew I couldn't stand it—couldn't go on."

Loder swallowed his whisky slowly. His sense of overpowering curiosity held him very still, but he made no effort to prompt his companion.

Again Chilcote shifted his position agitatedly. "It had to be done," he said disquietedly. "I had to do it—then and there. The things were on the bureau—the pens and ink and telegraph forms. They tempted me."

Loder laid down his glass suddenly. An exclamation rose to his lips, but he checked it.

At the slight sound of the tumbler touching the table Chilcote turned, but there was no expression on the other's face to frighten him.

"They tempted me," he repeated hastily. "They seemed like magnets; they seemed to draw me toward them. I sat at the bureau staring at them for a long time. Then a terrible compulsion seized me—something you could never understand—and I caught up the nearest pen and wrote just what was in my mind. It wasn't a telegram, properly speaking. It was more a letter. I wanted you back, and I had to make myself plain. The writing of the message seemed to steady me; the mere forming of the words quieted my mind. I was almost cool when I got up from the bureau and pressed the bell!"

"The bell?"

"Yes. I rang for a servant. I had to send the wire myself, so I had to get a cab." His voice rose to irritability. "I pressed the bell several times, but the thing had gone wrong; 'twouldn't work. At last I gave it up and went into the corridor to call some one."

Continued next week.

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