THE Masquerader

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

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CHAPTER XV—(Continued.)

Instantly she had turned Loder took Blessington's arm.

"I know you're tremendously busy," he began in an excellent imitation of Chilcote's hasty manner—"I know you're tremendously busy, but I'm in a fix." One glance at Blessington's healthy, ingenuous face told him that plain speaking was the method to adopt.

"Indeed, sir?" In a moment Blessington was on the alert.

"Yes. And I—I want your help."

The boy reddened. That Chilcote should appeal to him stirred him to an uneasy feeling of pride and uncertainty.

Loder saw his advantage and pressed it home. "It's come about through this crystal gazing business. I'm afraid I didn't play my part—rather made an ass of myself. I wouldn't swallow the thing, and—and Lady Astrupp"— He paused, measuring Blessington with a glance. "Well, my dear boy, you—you know what women are!"

Blessington was only twenty-three. He reddened again and assumed an air of profundity. "I know, sir," he said, with a shake of the head.

Loder's sense of humor was keen, but he kept a grave face. "I knew you'd catch my meaning. But I want you to do something more. If Lady Astrupp should ask you who was in her tent this past ten minutes, I want you"— Again he stopped, looking at his companion's face.

"Yes, sir?"

"I want you to tell an immaterial lie for me."

Blessington returned his glance; then he laughed a little uncomfortably. "But surely, sir"—

"She recognized me, you mean?" Loder's eyes were as keen as steel.

"Yes."

"Then you're wrong. She didn't."

Blessington's eyebrows went up.

There was silence. Loder glanced across the room. Eve had parted from the girl in green and was moving toward them, exchanging smiles and greetings as she came.

"My wife is coming back," he said. "Will you do this for me, Blessington? It—it will smooth things." He spoke quickly, continuing to watch Eve. As he had hoped, Blessington's eyes turned in the same direction. "'Twill smooth matters," he repeated—"smooth them in—in a domestic way that I can't explain."

The shot told. Blessington looked round.

"Right, sir," he said. "You may leave it to me." And before Loder could speak again he had turned and disappeared into the crowd.

CHAPTER XVI.

HIS business with Blessington over, Loder breathed more freely. If Lady Astrupp had recognized Chilcote by the rings and had been roused to curiosity the incident would demand settlement sooner or later—settlement in what proportion he could hazard no guess. If, on the other hand, her obvious change of manner had arisen from any other source—he had a hazy idea that a woman's behavior could never be gauged by accepted theories—then he had safeguarded Chilcote's interests and his own by his securing of Blessington's promise. Blessington he knew would be reliable and discreet. With a renewal of confidence—a pleasant feeling that his uneasiness had been groundless—he moved forward to greet Eve.

Her face, with its rich, clear coloring, seemed to his gaze to stand out from the crowd of other faces as from a frame, and a sense of pride touched him. In every eye but his own her beauty belonged to him.

His face looked alive and masterful as she reached his side. "May I monopolize you?" he said with the quickness of speech borrowed from Chilcote. "We—we see so little of each other."

Almost as if compelled, her lashes lifted, and her eyes met his. Her glance was puzzled, uncertain, slightly confused. There was a deeper color than usual in her cheeks. Loder felt something within his own consciousness stir in response.

"You know you are yielding," he said.

Again she blushed.

He saw the blush and knew that it was he—his words, his personality—that had called it forth. In Chilcote's actual semblance he had proved his superiority over Chilcote. For the first time he had been given a tacit, personal acknowledgment of his power. Involuntarily he drew nearer to her.

"Let's get out of this crush."

She made no answer except to bend her head, and it came to him that, for all her pride, she liked—and unconsciously yielded to—domination. With a satisfied gesture he turned to make a passage toward the door.

But the passage was more easily desired than made. In the few moments since he had entered the supper room the press of people had considerably thickened until a block had formed about the doorway. Drawing Eve with him he moved forward for a dozen paces, then paused, unable to make further headway.

As they stood there he looked back at her. "What a study in democracy a crowd always is!" he said.

She responded with a bright, appreciative glance, as if surprised into naturalness. He wondered sharply what she would be like if her enthusiasms were really aroused. Then a stir in the corridor outside caused a movement inside the room, and with a certain display of persistence he was enabled to make a passage to the door.

There again they were compelled to halt. But though tightly wedged into his new position and guarding Eve with one arm, Loder was free to survey the brilliantly thronged corridor over the head of a man a few inches shorter than himself, who stood directly in front of him.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked good humoredly, addressing the back of the stranger's head.

The man turned, displaying a genial face, a red mustache and an eyeglass.

"Hullo, Chilcote!" he said. "Hope it's not on your feet I'm standing."

Loder laughed. "No," he said. "And don't change the position. If you were an inch higher I should be blind as well as crippled."

The other laughed. It was a pleasant surprise to find Chilcote amiable under discomfort. He looked round again in slight curiosity.

Loder felt the scrutiny. To create a diversion he looked out along the corridor. "I believe we are waiting for something," he exclaimed. "What's this?" Then quite abruptly he ceased to speak.

"Anything interesting?" Eve touched his arm.

He said nothing. He made no effort to look round. His thought as well as his speech was suddenly suspended.

The man in front of him let his eyeglass fall from his eye, then screwed it in again.

"Jove," he exclaimed, "here comes our sorceress! It's like the progress of a fairy princess. I believe this is the meaning of our getting penned in here." He chuckled delightedly.

Loder said nothing. He stared straight on over the other's head.

Along the corridor, agreeably conscious of the hum of admiration she aroused, came Lillian Astrupp, surrounded by a little court. Her delicate face was lit up; her eyes shone under the faint gleam of her hair; her gown of gold embroidery swept round her gracefully. She was radiant and triumphant, but she was also excited. The excitement was evident in her laugh, in her gestures, in her eyes, as they turned quickly in one direction and then another.

Loder, gazing in stupefaction over the other man's head, saw it—felt and understood it with a mind that leaped back over a space of years. As in a shifting panorama he saw a night of disturbance and confusion in a faroff Italian valley—a confusion from which one face shone out with something of the pale, alluring radiance that filtered over the hillside from the crescent moon. It passed across his consciousness slowly, but with a slow completeness, and in its light the incidents of the past hour stood out in a new aspect. The echo of recollection stirred by Lady Bramfell's voice, the re-echo of it in the sister's tones; his own blindness, his own egregious assurance—all struck across his mind.

Meanwhile the party about Lillian drew nearer. He felt with instinctive certainty that the supper room was its destination, but he remained motionless, held by a species of fatalism. He watched her draw near with an unmoved face, but in the brief space that passed while she traversed the corridor he gauged to the full the hold that the new atmosphere, the new existence, had gained over his mind. With an unlooked for rush of feeling he realized how dearly he would part with it.

As Lillian came closer the meaning of her manner became clearer to him. She talked incessantly, laughing now and then, but her eyes were never quiet. These skimmed the length of the corridor, then glanced over the heads crowded in the doorway.

"I'll have something quite sweet, Geoffrey," she was saying to the man beside her as she came within hearing. "You know what I like—a sort of snowflake wrapped up in sugar." As she said the words her glance wandered. Loder saw it rest uninterestedly on a boy a yard or two in front of him, then move to the man over whose head he gazed, then lift itself inevitably to his face.

The glance was quick and direct. He saw the look of recognition spring across it; he saw her move forward suddenly as the crowd in the corridor parted to let her pass. Then he saw what seemed to him a miracle.

Her whole expression altered, her lips parted, and she colored with annoyance. She looked like a spoiled child who, seeing a bonbon box, opens it—to find it empty.

As the press about the doorway melted to give her passage the red haired man in front of Loder was the first to take advantage of the space. "Jove, Lillian," he said, moving forward, "you look as if you expected Chilcote to be somebody else, and are disappointed to find he's only himself!" He laughed delightedly at his own joke.

The words were exactly the tonic Lillian needed. She smiled her usual undisturbed smile as she turned her eyes upon him.

"My dear Leonard, you're using your eyeglass. When that happens you're never responsible for what you see." Her words came more slowly and with a touch of languid amusement. Her composure was suddenly restored.

Then for the first time Loder changed his position. Moved by an impulse he made no effort to dissect, he stepped back to Eve's side and slipped his arm through hers—successfully concealing his left hand.

The warmth of her skin through her long glove thrilled him unexpectedly. His impulse had been one of self defense, but the result was of a different character. At the quick contact the wish to fight for—to hold and defend—the position that had grown so dear woke in renewed force. With a new determination he turned again toward Lillian.

"I caught the same impression—without an eyeglass," he said. "Why did you look like that?" He asked the question steadily and with apparent carelessness, though through it all his reason stood aghast—his common sense cried aloud that it was impossible for the eyes that had seen his face in admiration, in love, in contempt, to fail now in recognition. The air seemed breathless while he spoke and waited. His impression of Lillian was a mere shimmering of gold dress and gold hair; all that he was really conscious of was the pressure of his hand on Eve's arm and the warmth

"Do you see what I mean, Eve?"

of her skin through the soft glove. Then abruptly the mist lifted. He saw Lillian's eyes—indifferent, amused, slightly contemptuous, and a second later he heard her voice.

"My dear Jack," she said sweetly, "how absurd of you! It was simply the contrast of your eyes peering over Leonard's hair. It was like a gorgeous sunset with a black cloud overhead." She laughed. "Do you see what I mean, Eve?" She affected to see Eve for the first time.

Eve had been looking calmly ahead. She turned now and smiled serenely. Loder felt no vibration of the arm he held, yet by an instant intuition he knew that the two women were antagonistic. He experienced it with the divination that follows upon a moment of acute suspense. He understood it, as he had understood Lillian's look of recognition when his forehead, eyes and nose had shown him to be himself; her blank surprise when his close shaven lip and chin had proclaimed him Chilcote.

He felt like a man who has looked into an abyss and stepped back from the edge, outwardly calm, but mentally shaken. The commonplaces of life seemed for the moment to hold deeper meanings. He did not hear Eve's answer; he paid no heed to Lillian's next remark. He saw her smile and turn to the red haired man; finally he saw her move on into the supper room, followed by her little court. Then he pressed the arm he was still holding. He felt an urgent need of companionship, of a human expression to the crisis he had passed.

"Shall we get out of this?" he asked again.

Eve looked up. "Out of the room?" she said.

He looked down at her, compelling her gaze. "Out of the room—and the house," he answered. "Let us go—home."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE necessary formalities of departure were speedily got through. The passing of the corridors, the gaining of the carriage, seemed to Loder to be marvelously simple proceedings. Then, as he sat by Eve's side and again felt the forward movement of the horses, he had leisure for the first time to wonder whether the time that had passed since last he occupied that position had actually been lived through.

Only that night he had unconsciously compared one incident in his life to a sketch in which the lights and shadows have been obliterated and lost. Now that picture rose before him, startlingly and incredibly intact. He saw the sunlit houses of Santasalire, backgrounded by the sunlit hills—saw them as plainly as when he himself had sketched them on his memory. Every detail of the scene remained the same, even to the central figure; only the eye and the hand of the artist had changed.

At this point Eve broke in upon his thoughts. Her first words were curiously coincidental.

"What did you think of Lillian Astrupp tonight?" she asked. "Wasn't her gown perfect?"

Loder lifted his head with an almost guilty start. Then he answered straight from his thoughts.

"I—I didn't notice it," he said, "but her eyes reminded me of a cat's eyes—and she walks like a cat. I never seemed to see it—until tonight."

Eve changed her position. "She was very artistic," she said tentatively. "Don't you think the gold gown was beautiful with her pale colored hair?"

Loder felt surprised. He was convinced that Eve disliked the other, and he was not sufficiently versed in women to understand her praise. "I thought"— he began. Then he wisely stopped. "I didn't see the gown," he substituted.

Eve looked out of the window. "How unappreciative men are!" she said. But her tone was strangely free from censure.

After this there was silence until Grosvenor square was reached. Having left the carriage and passed into the house, Eve paused for a moment at the foot of the stairs to give an order to Crapham, who was still in attendance in the hall, and again Loder had an opportunity of studying her. As he looked a sharp comparison rose to his mind.

"A fairy princess!" he had heard the red haired man say as Lillian Astrupp came into view along the Bramfells' corridor, and the simile had seemed particularly apt. With her grace, her delicacy, her subtle attraction, she might well be the outcome of imagination. But with Eve it was different. She also was graceful and attractive, but it was grace and attraction of a different order. One was beautiful with the beauty of the white rose that springs from the hothouse and withers at the first touch of cold; the other with the beauty of the wild rose on the cliffs above the sea, that keeps its petals fine and transparent in face of salt spray and wet mist. Eve, too, had her realm, but it was the realm of real things. A great confidence, a feeling that here one might rely even if all other faiths were shaken, touched him suddenly. For a moment he stood irresolute, watching her mount the stairs with her easy, assured step. Then a determination came to him. Fate favored him tonight; he was in luck tonight. He would put his fortune to one more test. He swung across the hall and ran up the stairs.

His face was keen with interest as he reached her side. The hard outline of his features and the hard grayness of his eyes were softened as when he had paused to talk with Lakeley. Action was the breath of his life, and his face changed under it as another's might change under the influence of stirring music or good wine.

Eve saw the look and again the uneasy expression of surprise crossed her eyes. She paused, her hand resting on the banister.

Loder looked at her directly. "Will you come into the study as you came that other night? There's something I want to say." He spoke quietly. He felt master of himself and her.

She hesitated, glanced at him and then glanced away.

"Will you come?" he said again. And as he said it his eyes rested on the sweep of her thick eyelashes, the curve of the back hair.

At last her lashes lifted and the perplexity and doubt in her blue eyes stirred him. Without waiting for her answer, he leaned forward.

"Say yes!" he urged. "I don't often ask for favors."

Still she hesitated. Then her decision was made for her. With a new boldness he touched her arm, drawing her forward gently but decisively toward Chilcote's rooms.

In the study a fire burned brightly, the desk was laden with papers, the lights were nicely adjusted, even the chairs were in their accustomed places. Loder's senses responded to each suggestion. It seemed but a day since he had seen it last. It was precisely as he had left it—the niche needing but the man.

To hide his emotion he crossed the floor quickly and drew a chair forward. In less than six hours he had run up and down the scale of emotions. He had looked despair in the face till the sudden sight of Chilcote had lifted him to the skies; since then surprise had assailed him in its strongest form; he had known the full meaning of the word "risk," and from every contingency he had come out conqueror. He bent over the chair as he pulled it forward to hide the expression in his eyes.

"Sit down," he said gently.

Eve moved toward him. She moved slowly, as if half afraid. Many emotions stirred her—distrust, uncertainty and a curious half dominant, half suppressed questioning that it was difficult to define. Loder remembered her shrinking coldness, her reluctant tolerance on the night of his first coming, and his individuality, his certainty of power, kindled afresh. Never had he been so vehemently himself; never had Chilcote seemed so complete a shadow.

As Eve seated herself he moved forward and leaned over the back of his chair. The impulse that had filled him in his interview with Renwick, that had goaded him as he drove to the reception, was dominant again.

"I tried to say something as we drove to the Bramfells' tonight," he began. Like many men who possess eloquence for an impersonal cause, he was brusque, even blunt, in the stating of his own case. "May I hark back, and go on from where I broke off?"

Eve half turned. Her face was still puzzled and questioning. "Of course." She sat forward again, clasping her hands.

He looked thoughtfully at the back of her head, at the slim outline of her shoulders, the glitter of the diamonds about her neck.

"Do you remember the day, three weeks ago, that we talked together in this room—the day a great many things seemed possible?"

This time she did not look round. She kept her gaze upon the fire.

"Do you remember?" he persisted quietly. In his college days men who heard that tone of quiet persistence had been wont to lose heart. Eve heard it now for the first time and, without being aware, answered to it.

"Yes, I remember," she said.

"On that day you believed in me." The earnestness he no longer simulated Chilcote; he spoke with his own steady reliance. He saw Eve stir, unclasp and clasp her hands, but he went steadily on. "On that day you saw me in a new light. You acknowledged me." He emphasized the slightly peculiar word. "But since that day"—his voice quickened—"since that day your feelings have changed, your faith in me has fallen away." He watched her closely, but she made no sign, save to lean still nearer to the fire. He crossed his arms over the back of her chair. "You were justified," he said suddenly. "I've not been—myself since that day." As he said the words his coolness forsook him slightly. He loathed the necessary lie, yet his egotism clamored for vindication. "All men have their lapses," he went on. "There are times—there are days and weeks when I—when my"—The word "nerves" touched his tongue, hung upon it, then died away unspoken.

Very quietly, almost without a sound, Eve had risen and turned toward him. She was standing very straight, her face a little pale, the hand that rested on the arm of her chair trembling slightly.

"John," she said quickly, "don't say that word! Don't say that hideous word 'nerves!' I don't feel that I can bear it tonight—not just tonight. Can you understand?"

Loder stepped back. Without comprehending, he felt suddenly and strangely at a loss. Something in her face struck him silent and perplexed. It seemed that without preparation he had stepped upon dangerous ground. With an undefined apprehension, he waited, looking at her.

"I can't explain it," she went on with nervous haste, "I can't give any reasons, but quite suddenly the—the farce has grown unbearable. I used not to think—used not even to care—but suddenly things have changed—or I have changed." She paused, confused and distressed. "Why should it be? Why should things change?" She asked the question sharply, as if in appeal against her own incredulity.

Loder turned aside. He was afraid of the triumph, volcanic and irrepressible, that her admission roused.

"Why?" she said again.

He turned slowly back. "You forget that I'm not a magician," he said gently. "I hardly know what you are speaking of."

For a moment she was silent, but in that moment her eyes spoke. Pain, distress, pride, all strove for expression; then at last her lips parted.

"Do you say that in seriousness?" she asked.

It was no moment for fencing, and Loder knew it. "In seriousness," he replied shortly.

"Then I shall speak seriously too." Her voice shook slightly and the color came back into her face, but the hand on the arm of the chair ceased to tremble. "For more than four years I have known that you take drugs—for more than four years I have acquiesced in your deceptions, in your meannesses"—

There was an instant's silence. Then Loder stepped forward.

"You knew—for four years?" he said, very slowly. For the first time that night he remembered Chilcote and forgot himself.

Eve lifted her head with a quick gesture, as if, in flinging off discretion and silence, she appreciated to the full the new relief of speech.

"Yes, I knew. Perhaps I should have spoken when I first surprised the secret, but it's all so past that it's useless to speculate now. It was fate, I suppose. I was very young, you were very unapproachable, and—and we had no love to make the way easy." For a second her glance faltered and she looked away. "A woman's—a girl's—disillusioning is a very sad comedy—it should never have an audience." She laughed a little bitterly as she looked back again. "I saw all the deceits, all the subterfuges, all the—lies." She said the word deliberately, meeting his eyes.

Again he thought of Chilcote, but his face paled.

Continued next Saturday.

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