

THE Masquerader

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

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CHAPTER XIX—(Continued.)

Greening had been among the most absorbed of those who listened to his speech. Passing at one into the room, he crossed as if by instinct to the desk, and the letters lay the significant envelope of a telegram. The telegram that in an informed, subconscious way had sprung to his expectation on the moment of Fraide's congratulation.

CHAPTER XX.

On the fifth day after the momentous 1st of April on which he had recalled Loder and resumed his own life Chilcote left his house and walked toward Bond street. Though the morning was clear and the air almost warm for the time of year, he was hastened into a long crescent and was wearing a muffler and a pair of downy gloves. As he passed along the street he kept close to the house fronts to avoid the sun that was everywhere stirring the winter bound town like a suffusion of young blood through old veins. He avoided the warmth because in this instance warmth meant light, but as he moved he shivered slightly from time to time with the haunting, penetrating cold that of late had become his persistent shadow.

He was ill at ease as he hurried forward. With each succeeding day of the old life the new annoyances, the new obligations, became more hampering. Before his compact with Loder this old life had been a net about his feet. Now the meshes seemed to have narrowed, the net itself to have spread till it smothered his whole being. His own household, his own rooms even, offered no sanctuary. The presence of another personality tinged the atmosphere. It was preposterous, but it was undeniable. The lay figure that he had set in his place had proved to be flesh and blood, had usurped his life, his position, his very personality, by sheer right of strength. As he walked along Bond street in the first sunshine of the year, jostled by the well dressed crowd, he felt a paralytic.

He revolved at the new order of things, but the revolt was a silent one—the iron of expediency had entered into his soul. He dared not jeopardize Loder's position because he dared not displease with Loder. The door that guarded his vice drew him more restlessly with every indulgence, and Loder's was the voice that called the "open sesame."

He walked on aimlessly. He had been but five days at home, and already the quiet, green grass court of Clifford's inn, the bare staircase, the comfortable privacy of Loder's rooms, seemed a haven of refuge. The speed with which this hunger had returned frightened him.

He walked forward rapidly and without encountering a check. Then suddenly the spell was broken. From the slowly moving, brilliantly dressed throng of people some one called him by his name, and, turning, he saw Lillian Astrop.

She was stepping from the door of a jeweler's, and as he turned she raised, holding out her hand.

"The very person I would have wished to see!" she exclaimed. "Where have you been these hundred years? I've heard of nobody but you since you've turned politician and ceased to be a mere member of parliament." She laughed softly. The laugh suited the light spring air, as she herself suited the pleasant, superficial scene.

He took her hand and held it. While his eyes traveled from her delicate face to her pale cloth gown, from her soft furs to the bunch of roses fastened in her muff. The sight of her was a curious relief. Her cool, slim fingers were so casual, yet so clinging; her voice and her presence were so redolent of easy, artificial things.

"How well you look!" he said involuntarily. Again she laughed. "That's my prerogative," she responded lightly. "But I was serious in being glad to see you. Sarcastic people are always so intuitive. I'm looking for some one with intuition."

Chilcote glanced up. "Extravagant again?" he said dryly. She smiled at him sweetly. "Jack," she murmured, with slow reproach. Chilcote laughed quickly. "I understand. You've changed your minister of finance. I'm warned in some other direction."

This time her reproach was expressed by a glance. "You are always wanted," she said.

The words seemed to rouse him again to the shadowy self distrust that the sight of her had lifted.

"It's—it's delightful to meet you, Lillian."

"What illness?" he asked sharply. She glanced away across the long sweep of tan covered drive stretching between the trees. Then he glanced furtively back.

"By the way," he said quickly, "you wanted me for something?" The memory of her earlier suggestion came as a sudden boon.

She lifted her muff again and covered her roses thoughtfully. "Oh, it was nothing, really," she said. "You sarcastic people give very shrewd suggestions sometimes, and I've been rather wanting a suggestion on an adventure that I've had." She looked down at her flowers with a charmingly attractive air.

But Chilcote's restlessness had increased. Looking up, she suddenly caught the expression, and her own face changed.

"My dear Jack," she said softly, "what a bore I am! Let's forget tedious things and enjoy ourselves." She looked toward him carelessly with an air of concern and reproach.

The action was not without effect. Her soothing voice, her smile, her almost affectionate gesture, each carried weight. With a swift return of assurance he responded to her tone.

"Right!" he said. "Right! We will enjoy ourselves!" He laughed quickly and again with a conscious movement lifted his hand to his muffler.

"Then we'll postpone the advice?" Lillian laughed too. "Yes, Right! We'll postpone it." The word pleased him, and he caught at it. "We won't bother about it now, but we won't shelve it altogether. We'll postpone it."

"Exactly." She settled herself more comfortably. "You'll dine with me one night—and we can talk it out then. I see so little of you nowadays," she added in a lower voice.

"My dear girl, you're unfair!" Chilcote's spirits had risen. He spoke rapidly, almost pleasantly. "It isn't I who keep away. It's the stupid affairs of the world that keep me. I'd be with you every hour of the twelve if I had my way."

She looked up at the bare trees. Her expression was a delightful mixture of amusement, satisfaction and skepticism. "Then you will dine?" she said at last.

"Certainly." His reaction to high spirits carried him forward. "Now come! Shall we fix a day?"

"A day? Yes; you—if you like." He hesitated for an instant, then again the impulse of the previous moment dominated his other feeling. "Yes," he said quickly. "Yes. After all, why not fix it now?"

With a sudden inclination toward amusement he opened his overcoat, thrust his hand into an inner pocket and drew out his engagement book—the same long, narrow book fitted with two pencils that Loder had loaned so interestingly on his first morning at Grosvenor square.

He opened it, turning the pages rapidly. "What day shall it be? Thursday's full and Friday and Saturday. What a bore!" He still talked fast.

Lillian leaned across. "What a sweet book!" she said. "But why the blue crosses?" She touched one of the pages with her gloved finger.

Chilcote jerked the book, then laughed, with a touch of embarrassment. "Oh, the crosses! Merely to remind me that certain appointments must be kept. You know my beastly memory! But what about the day? Shall we fix the day?"

His voice was in control, but mentally her trivial question had disturbed and jarred him. "What day shall we say?" he repeated. "Monday in next week?"

Lillian glanced up, with a faint exclamation of disappointment. "How horribly far away!" She spoke with anxious eagerness, and leaning forward again, drew the book from Chilcote's hand. "What about tomorrow?" she exclaimed, turning back a page.

"Why not tomorrow? I knew I saw a blank space?"

"Tomorrow? Oh, I—I—I!" He stopped. "Jack!" Her voice dropped. It was true that she desired Chilcote's opinion on the matter, for Chilcote's opinion on matters and manners had a certain bitter shrewdness, but the exercise of her own power added a point to the desire. If the matter had ended with the gain or loss of a tea-party with him, it is probable that, whatever its utility, she would not have pressed it, but the underlying motive was the stronger. Chilcote had been a satellite for years, and it was unpleasant that any satellite should drop away into space.

"Jack!" she said again in a lower voice.

Some shred of her thought, some glimpse of the comparison running through her mind, must have shown in her face, for Chilcote altered his position with a touch of uneasiness. He

and still more effective tone, and, turning her muff, she buried her face in her flowers. "I suppose I shall have to dine and go to a music hall with Leonard—or stay at home by myself," she murmured, looking out across the trees.

Again Chilcote glanced over the long, tan strewn ride. They had made the full circuit of the park.

"It's tiresome being by oneself," she murmured.

For a while he was irresponsive; then slowly his eyes returned to her face. He watched her for a second, and, leaning quickly toward her, he took her hand and scribbled something in the vacant space.

She looked at him curiously. The face lighted up, and she laid aside her muff.

"Dear Jack!" she said. "How very sweet of you!" Then, as he held the book toward her, her face fell. "Dine at Grosvenor gardens, 8 o'clock; talk with Lillian." She read. "Why, you've forgotten the essential thing!"

He looked up. "The essential thing?" She smiled. "The blue cross," she said. "Isn't it worth even a little time?" The tone was very soft. Chilcote yielded.

"You have the blue pencil," he said in sudden response to her mood. She glanced up in quiet pleasure at her success, and, with a charming air of engagement with a big cross. At the same moment the car slackened speed, as the chauffeur waited for further orders.

Lillian shut the engagement book and handed it back. "Where can I drop you?" she asked. "At the club?"

The question recalled him to a sense of present things. He thrust the book into his pocket and glanced about him. They had passed by Hyde park corner. The crowd of horses and carriages had thinned as the hour of lunch drew near, and the wide roadway of the park had an air of added space.

The suggested loneliness affected him. The tall trees, still bare of leaves, and the colossal gateway incomprehensibly stirred the sense of mental panic that sometimes seized him in face of vastness of space or of architecture. In one moment Lillian, the appointment he had just made, the manner of its making, all left him. The world was filled with his own personality, his own immediate inclinations.

"Don't bother about me!" he said quickly. "I can get out here. You've been very good. It's been a delightful morning." With a hurried pressure of her fingers he rose and stepped from the car.

Reaching the ground, he paused for a moment and raised his hat; then, without a second glance, he turned and walked rapidly away.

Lillian sat watching him meditatively. She saw him pass through the gateway, saw him half a hansom; then she remembered the waiting chauffeur.

CHAPTER XXI.

On the same day that Chilcote had parted with Lillian—but at 3 o'clock in the afternoon—Loder, dressed in Chilcote's clothes and with Chilcote's heavy overcoat slung over his arm, walked from Fleet street to Grosvenor square.

He walked steadily, neither slowly nor yet fast. The elation of his last journey over the same ground was tempered by feelings he could not satisfactorily bracket even to himself. There was less of vehement elation and more of matured determination in his gait and bearing than there had been on that night, though the incidents of which they were the outcome were very complex.

On reaching Chilcote's house he passed upstairs, but, still following the routine of his previous return, he did not halt at Chilcote's door, but moved onward toward Eve's sitting room and there paused.

In that pause his numberless irregular thoughts fixed into one. He had the same undefined sense of standing upon sacred ground that had touched him on the previous occasion, but the outcome of the sensation was different. This time he raised his hand almost immediately and tapped on the door.

He waited, but no voice responded to his knock. With a sense of disappointment he knocked again; then, pressing his determination still further, he turned the handle and entered the room.

No private room is without meaning, whether trivial or the reverse. In a room perhaps more even than in speech, in look or in work does the impress of the individual make itself felt. There on the wax of outer things the inner self imprints its seal, enforces its feeling claim to separate individuality. This thought, with its pressing interest, made Loder walk slowly, almost seriously, halfway across the room and then pause to study his surroundings.

The room was of medium size—not too large for comfort and not too small for ample space. At first impression it struck him as unlike any anticipation of a woman's sanctum. The walls were painted in dark wood, the richly bound books, the beautifully designed bronze ornaments, even the flowers, deep crimson and forget blue in tone, had an air of somber harmony that was scarcely feminine. With a strongly pleasant impression he realized this, and, following his habitual impulse, moved slowly forward toward the fireplace and there paused, his elbow resting on the mantelpiece.

He had scarcely settled comfortably into his seat, scarcely entered on his second and more comprehensive study of the place, than the arrangement of his mind was altered by the turning of the handle and the opening of the door.

The newcomer was Eve herself. She was dressed in outdoor clothes and walked into the room quickly; then, as Loder had done, she, too, paused.

The gesture, so natural and spontaneous, had a peculiar attraction. As she glanced up at him, her face alight with inquiry, she seemed extraordinarily much the owner and designer of her surroundings. She was framed by them as naturally and effectively as her eyes and her face were framed by her black hair. For one moment he forgot that his presence demanded explanation; the next he had made explanation needless. She had been looking at him intently; now she came forward slowly.

"John!" she said, half in a gasp, half in question. He took a step toward her. "Look at me!" she said quickly and impulsively. In the sharp desire to establish himself in her regard he forgot that her eyes had never left his face.

But the singularity of the words did not alarm her. "Oh," she exclaimed. "I believe I knew directly I saw you here." The quickening of her breathing in her tone surprised him. But he had other thoughts more urgent than surprise.

In the five days of banishment just lived through the need for a readjustment of his position with regard to her had come to him forcibly. The memory of the night when weakness and he had been at perilously close quarters had returned to him persistently and uncomfortably, spoiling the remembrance of his triumph. It had been well enough to another the thought of that night in days of work, but the ignoring of it blotted out the weakness? Had it not rather thrown it into bolder relief? A man strong in his own strength does not turn his back upon temptation. His faces and quells it. In the solitary days in Clifford's inn, in the solitary night hours spent in tramping the city streets, this had been the conviction that had recurred again and again, this the problem to which, after much consideration, he had found a solution, satisfactory at least to himself. When next Chilcote called him—it was notable that he had used the word "when" and not "if." When next Chilcote called him he would make a new departure. He would no longer avoid Eve. He would successfully prove to himself that one

interest and one alone filled his mind—the pursuit of Chilcote's political career. So does man satisfactorily convince himself against himself. He had this intention fully in mind as he came forward now.

"Well," he said slowly, "has it been very hard to have faith these last five days?" It was not precisely the tone he had meant to adopt, but one must begin.

Eve turned at his words. Her eyes were brimming with life, her cheeks still touched to a deep, soft color by the keenness of the wintry air.

"No," she answered, with a shy, responsive touch of confidence. "I seem to keep on believing. You know converts make the best devotees." She laughed with slight embarrassment and glanced up at him. Something in the blue of her eyes reminded him unexpectedly of spring skies—full of youth and promise.

He moved abruptly and crossed the room toward the window. "Eve," he said, without looking around, "I want your help."

He heard the faint rustling of her dress as she turned toward him, and he knew that he had struck the right chord. All true women respond to an appeal for aid as steel answers to the magnet. He could feel her expectancy in the silence.

"You know—we all know—that the present moment is very vital. That it is impossible to deny the crisis in the air."

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The gesture, so natural and spontaneous, had a peculiar attraction. As she glanced up at him, her face alight with inquiry, she seemed extraordinarily much the owner and designer of her surroundings. She was framed by them as naturally and effectively as her eyes and her face were framed by her black hair. For one moment he forgot that his presence demanded explanation; the next he had made explanation needless. She had been looking at him intently; now she came forward slowly.

"John!" she said, half in a gasp, half in question. He took a step toward her. "Look at me!" she said quickly and impulsively. In the sharp desire to establish himself in her regard he forgot that her eyes had never left his face.

But the singularity of the words did not alarm her. "Oh," she exclaimed. "I believe I knew directly I saw you here." The quickening of her breathing in her tone surprised him. But he had other thoughts more urgent than surprise.

In the five days of banishment just lived through the need for a readjustment of his position with regard to her had come to him forcibly. The memory of the night when weakness and he had been at perilously close quarters had returned to him persistently and uncomfortably, spoiling the remembrance of his triumph. It had been well enough to another the thought of that night in days of work, but the ignoring of it blotted out the weakness? Had it not rather thrown it into bolder relief? A man strong in his own strength does not turn his back