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THE Masquerader

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

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that faced him, line upon line, seemed to flash and brighten with critical interest. Only Fraide made no change of expression. He sat placid, serious, attentive, with the shadow of a smile behind his eyes.

Again Loder paused, but this time the pause was shorter. The ordeal he had dreaded and dreaded was passed, and he saw his way clearly. With the old movement of the shoulders he straightened himself and once more began to speak. This time his voice rang quietly true and commanding across the floor of the house.

No first step can be really great. It must of necessity possess more of prophecy than of achievement. Nevertheless it is by the first step that a man marks the value not only of his cause but of himself. Following broadly on the lines that tradition has laid down for the Conservative orator, Loder disguised rather than displayed the vein of strong, persuasive eloquence that was his natural gift. The occasion that might possibly justify such a display of individuality might lie with the future, but it had no application to the present. For the moment his duty was to voice his party sentiments with as much lucidity, as much logic and as much calm conviction as lay within his capacity.

Standing quietly in Chilcote's place, he was conscious with a deep sense of



His voice rang quietly true and commanding.

gravity of the peculiarity of his position, and perhaps it was this unconscious and unstudied seriousness that lent him the tone of weight and judgment so essential to the cause he had in mind. It has always been difficult to arouse the interest of the house on matters of British policy in Persia. Once aroused it may, it is true, reach fever heat with remarkable rapidity, but the introductory stages offer that worst danger to the earnest speaker—the dread of an apathetic audience. But from this consideration Loder, by his sharp consciousness of personal difficulties, was given immunity.

Pitching his voice in that quietly masterful tone that beyond all others compels attention, he took up his subject and dealt with it with dispassionate force. With great skill he touched

on the steady southward advance of Russia into Persian territory from the distant days when, by a curious irony of fate, Russian and British enterprise combined to make entry into the country under the sanction of the grand duke of Moscow to the present hour, when this great power of Russia—long since alienated by interests and desires from her former co-operator—had taken a step which in the eyes of every thinking man must possess a deep significance.

With his usual quiet persistence he pointed out the peculiar position of Meshed in the distant province of Khorassan, its vast distance from the Persian gulf, round which British interests and influence center, and the consequently alarming position of hundreds of traders who, in the security of British sovereignty, are fighting their way upward from India, from Afghanistan, even from England herself.

Following up his point, he dilated on these subjects of the British crown who, cut off from adequate assistance, can only turn in personal or commercial peril to the protective power of the nearest consulate. Then, quietly demanding the attention of his hearers, he marshaled fact after fact to demonstrate the isolation and inadequacy of a consulate so situated; the all but arbitrary power of Russia, who in her new occupation of Meshed had only two considerations to withhold her from open aggression—the knowledge of England as a very considerable, but also a very distant, power; the knowledge of Persia as an imminent, but wholly impotent, factor in the case.

Having stated his opinions, he reverted to the motive of his speech—his desire to put forward a strong protest against the adjournment of the house without an assurance from the government that to safeguard British interests in Meshed and throughout the province of Khorassan.

human enough to be susceptible to the change.

The first appreciation of it came immediately after the excitement of the division, when Fraide, singling him out, took his arm and pressed it affectionately.

"My dear Chilcote," he said, "we are all proud of you!" Then, looking up into his face, he added, in a graver tone, "but keep your mind upon the future; never be blinded by the present, however bright it seems."

At the touch of his hand, at the spontaneous approval of his first words, Loder's pride thrilled, and in a vehement rush of ambition his senses answered to the praise. Then, as Fraide in all unconsciousness, added his second sentence, the hot glow of feeling suddenly chilled.

In a sweep of intuitive reaction the meaning and the danger of his falsely real position extinguished his excitement and dropped from him the words that he had involuntarily uttered as he withdrew his arm.

"You're very good, sir," he said. "And you're very right. We never should forget that there is—a future."

The old man glanced up, surprised by the tone.

"Quite so, Chilcote," he said kindly. "But we only advise those in whom we believe to look toward it. Shall we find my wife? I know she will want to bear you home with us."

But Loder's joy in himself and his achievement was dropped from him. He shrank suddenly from Lady Sarah's congratulations and Eve's warm, silent approbation.

"Thanks, sir," he said, "but I don't feel fit for society. A touch of my nerves, I suppose." He laughed shortly. "But do you mind saying to Eve that I hope I have satisfied her?" He added this as if in half reluctant afterthought.

Then, with a short pressure of Fraide's hand, he turned, avoiding the many groups that waited to claim him, and passed out of the house alone.

Hailing a cab, he drove to Grosvenor square. All the exaltation of an hour ago had turned to ashes. His excitement had found its culmination in a sense of futility and premonition.

He met no one in the hall or on the stairs of Chilcote's house, and on entering the study he found that also deserted.

Greening had been among the most absorbed of those who listened to his speech. Passing at once into the room, he crossed as if by instinct to the desk, and there halted.

On the top of some unopened letters lay the significant yellow envelope of a telegram; the telegram that in an unformed, subconscious way had sprung to his expectation on the moment of Fraide's congratulation.

Very quietly he picked it up, opened and read it, and, with the automatic caution that had become habitual, carried it across the room and dropped it in the fire. This done, he returned to the desk, read the letters that awaited Chilcote, and scribbling the necessary notes upon the margins, left them in readiness for Greening. Then, moving with the same quiet suppression, he passed from the room, down the stairs and out into the street by the way he had come.

CHAPTER XX.

On the fifth day after the momentous list 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 buttoned into a long overcoat and was wearing a muffler and a pair of doekin 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, permeating 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 pariah.

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 dispense with Loder. The door that guarded his vice drew him more resistlessly 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, grass grown 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 Astrupp.

She was stepping from the door of a jeweler's, and as he turned she paused, 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

smiled sorry. 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 curls 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 wanted 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 like this," he began, "and I wish the meeting wasn't momentary. But I'm—I'm come round one afternoon—or evening, when you're alone." He fumbled for a moment with the collar of his coat and glanced furtively upward toward Oxford street.

But again Lillian smiled, this time to herself. If she understood anything on earth, it was Chilcote and his moods.

"If one may be careless of anything," Jack," she said lightly, "surely it's of time. I can imagine being pressed for anything else in the world. If it's an appointment you're worrying about, a motor goes ever so much faster than a cab."

She looked at him tentatively, her head slightly on one side, her mouth raised till the roses and some of the soft fur touched her cheek.

She looked very charming and very persuasive as Chilcote glanced back. Again she seemed to represent a respite—something graceful and subtle in a world of oppressive obligations. His eyes strayed from her figure to the smart motor car drawn up beside the curb.

She saw the glance. "Ever so much quicker," she insinuated. And, smiling again, she stepped forward from the door of the shop. After a second's indecision Chilcote followed her.

The waiting car had three seats, one in front for the chauffeur, two vis-à-vis at the back, offering pleasant possibilities of a tete-a-tete.

"The park—and drive slowly," Lillian ordered as she stepped inside, motioning Chilcote to the seat opposite.

They moved up Bond street smoothly and rapidly. Lillian was absorbed in the passing traffic until the Marble arch was reached; then, as they looked through the big gates, she looked across at her companion. He had turned up the collar of his coat, though the wind was scarcely perceptible, and buried himself in it to the ears.

"It is extraordinary," she exclaimed suddenly as her eyes rested on his face. It was seldom that she felt drawn to exclamation. She was usually too indolent to show surprise. But now the feeling was called forth before she was aware.

Chilcote looked up. "What's extraordinary?" he said sensitively.

She leaned forward for an instant and touched his hand.

"Bear," she said teasingly. "Did I rub your fur the wrong way?" Then, seeing his expression, she tactfully changed her tone. "I'll explain. It was the same thing that struck me the night of Blanche's party—when you looked at me over Leonard Kaine's head. You remember?" She glanced away from him across the park to where the grass was already showing greener.

Chilcote felt ill at ease. Again he put his hand to his coat collar.

"Oh, yes," he said hastily. "Yes." He wished now that he had questioned Loder more closely on the proceedings of that party. It seemed to him on looking back that Loder had mentioned nothing on the day of their last exchange but the political complications that absorbed his mind.

(To be continued.)

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