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The MASQUERADER

By Katherine Cecil Thurston, Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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"You are exempt from all penalties tonight," she said. "The party is to greet the members of his party who had strolled across from the window in his wake."

As she moved aside Bramfell looked at Loder. "Well, Chilcote, 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 in Eve's direction. "You've heard of our new departure, Mrs. Chilcote?"

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 to 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 Witcheaston? 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. "Witcheaston 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 satisfactory."

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

Blessington wavered 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 Chilcote!"—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 come back to me, it's years since we'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, unoppressive scents, its temperately 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 soft piping 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 urgency. It seemed so paltry 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.

He had an infectious laugh, and Loder responded to it.

"But what am I to do?" he persisted. "Oh, nothing. Being the priestess, she naturally demands acolytes, but she'll let you know that she holds the prior place. The tent is so fixed that she sees nothing beyond your hands, so there's absolutely no delusion." He laughed once more. Then suddenly he lowered his voice and slackened his steps. "Here we are," he whispered in pretended awe.

At the end of the path the space widened to the full breadth of the conservatory. The light was dimmer, giving an added impression of distance, a way to the left Loder heard the sound of splashing water, and on his right hand he caught his first glimpse of the tent that was his goal.

It was an artistic little structure—a pavilion formed of silky fabric that showed bronze in the light of an oriental lamp that hung above its entrance. As they drew closer a man emerged from it. He stood for a moment in uncertainty, looking about him; then, catching sight of them, he came forward, laughing.

"By George," he exclaimed, "it's as dark as Jimbo in there! I don't see you at all. Come along, sir," he added to Loder, drawing him forward with an energetic pressure of the arm.

Loder responded, and as he did so a flicker of curiosity touched his mind for the first time. He wondered for an instant who this woman was who aroused so much comment. And with the speculation came the remembrance of how she had assured Chilcote that on one point at least he was invulnerable. He had spoken then from the height of a past experience—an experience so fully passed that he wondered now if it had been as staple a guarantee as he had believed. Maria's capacity for outliving is astonishingly complete. The long ago incident in the Italian mountains had faded, like a crayon study in which the tones have merged and gradually lost character. The past had faded before the present, as golden hair might pale before black. The simile came with apparent irrelevance. Then again Blessington pressed his arm.

"Now, sir!" he said, drawing away and lifting the curtain that hung before the entrance of the tent.

Loder looked at the amused, boyish face lighted by the hanging lamp and smiled pleasantly; then, with a shrug of the shoulders, he entered the pavilion, and the curtain fell behind him.

CHAPTER XV.

ON entering the pavilion Loder's first feeling was one of annoyed awkwardness at finding himself in almost total darkness. But as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom the feeling vanished and the absurdity of the position came to his mind.

The tent was small, heavily draped with silk and smelling of musk. It was divided into two sections by an immovable curtain that hung from the roof to within a few feet of the floor.

The only furniture on Loder's side was one low chair, and the only light a faint radiance that, coming from the invisible half of the pavilion, spread across the floor in a pale band. For a short space he stood uncertain, then his hesitation was brought to an end.

"Please sit down," said a low, soft voice.

For a further moment he stood undecided. The voice sounded so unexpectedly near. In the quiet and darkness of the place it seemed to possess a disproportionate weight, almost the weight of a familiar thing. Then with a sudden, unnamable touch of relief, he vacated the impression. It was the similarity to Lady Bramfell's sweet, slow tones that had stirred his mind. With a sense of satisfaction he drew the chair forward and sat down.

Then for the first time he saw that on the other side of the gauze partition and below it by a few inches was a small table of polished wood, on which stood an open book, a crystal ball and a gold dish filled with lilies. 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 had an eye for stage management, 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 mingled disconcertingly 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 Chilcote with his nerves and his impatience going through this ordeal; then in good humored 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 un-



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seen 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 possibility of irony far into the background. The thought of Chilcote and of the one flaw in their otherwise flawless scheme rose to his mind. Instinctively he half 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 the voice softly. It sounded laud, but very rational. The idea of retreat seemed suddenly theatrical. In this world of low voices and shaded lights people never adopted extreme measures—no occasion made a scene practicable or even allowable. He leaned back slowly, while he summed up the situation. If by any unlucky chance this woman knew Chilcote to have adopted jewelry and had seen the designs of his rings the sight of his own scorched finger would suggest question and comment. If, on the other hand, he left the pavilion without excuse or if without apparent reason he refused to remove the rings, he opened up a new difficulty, a fresh road to curiosity. It came upon him with unusual quickness—the obstacles to and the need for a speedy decision.

He glanced round the tent; then unconsciously he straightened his shoulders.

"Now, sir!" he said, drawing away and lifting the curtain that hung before the entrance of the tent.

Loder looked at the amused, boyish face lighted by the hanging lamp and smiled pleasantly; then, with a shrug of the shoulders, he entered the pavilion, and the curtain fell behind him.

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