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The MASQUERADER

By Katherine Cecil Thurston,
Author of "The Circle," Etc.
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And so it came about that he took his second false step. Once during the press of the next morning's work it crossed his mind to verify his convictions by a glance at the directory, but for once the strong wish that evolves a thought conquered his caution. His work was absorbing; the need of verification seemed very small. He let the suggestion pass.

At 7 o'clock he dressed carefully. His mind was full of Lakeley and of the possibilities the night might hold; for more than once before the weight of the St. George's Gazette, with Lakeley at its back, had turned the political scales. To be marked by him as a coming man was at any time a favorable portent; to be singled out by him at the present juncture was momentous. A thrill of expectancy, almost excitement, passed through him as he surveyed his appearance preparatory to leaving the house.

Passing downstairs, he moved at once to the hall door, but almost as his hand touched it he halted, attracted by a movement on the landing above him. Turning, he saw Eve.

She was standing quite still, looking down upon him as she had looked once before. As their eyes met she changed her position hastily.

"You are going out?" she asked. And it struck Loder quickly that there was a suggestion, a shadow of disappointment in the tone of her voice. Moved by the impression, he responded with unusual promptness.

"Yes," he said. "I'm dining out-dining with Lakeley."

She watched him intently while he spoke; then, as the meaning of his words reached her her whole face brightened.

"With Mr. Lakeley?" she said. "Oh, I'm glad—very glad. It is quite—quite another step." She smiled with a warm, impulsive touch of sympathy.

Loder, looking up at her, felt his senses stir. At sound of her words his secret craving for success quickened to stronger life. The man whose sole incentive lies within may go forward coldly and successfully; but the man who grasps a double inspiration, who, even unconsciously, is impelled by another force, has a stronger impetus for attack, a surer, more vital heaving power. Still watching her, he answered instinctively:

"Yes," he said slowly, "a long step." And with a smile of farewell, he turned, opened the door and passed into the road.

The thrill of that one moment was still warm as he reached Cadogan gardens and mounted the steps of No. 33—so vitally warm that he paused for an instant before pressing the electric bell. Then at last, dominated by anticipation, he turned and raised his hand.

The action was abrupt, and it was only as his fingers pressed the bell that a certain unexpectedness, a certain want of suitability in the aspect of the house, struck him. The door was white, the handle and knocker were of mass-pointing index of Lakeley's private taste, the second a ridiculous temptation to needy humanity. He looked again at the number of the house, but it stared back at him convincingly. Then the door opened.

So keen was his sense of unfitness that, still trying to fuse his impression of Lakeley with the idea of silver door fittings, he stepped into the hall without the usual preliminary question. Suddenly realizing the necessity, he turned to the servant, but the man forestalled him:

"Will you come into the white room, sir? And may I take your coat?"

The smooth certainty of the man's manner surprised him. It held another savor of disappointment, seeming as little in keeping with the keen, businesslike Lakeley as did the house. Still struggling with his impression, he allowed himself to be relieved of his hat and coat and in silence ushered up the shallow staircase.

As the last step was reached it came to him again to mention his host's name, but simultaneously with the suggestion the servant stepped forward with a quick, silent movement and threw open a door.

"Mr. Chilcote!" he announced in a subdued, discreet voice.

Loder's first impression was of a room that seemed unusually luxurious, soft and shadowed. Then all impression of inanimate things left him suddenly.

For the fraction of a second he stood in the doorway, while the room seemed emptied of everything except a figure that rose slowly from a couch before the fire at sound of Chilcote's name. Then, with a calmness that to himself seemed incredible, he moved forward into the room.

He might, of course, have beaten a retreat and observed many things, but life is full of things that have been, and retreat never presents itself agreeably to a strong man. His impulse was to face the difficulty, and he acted on the impulse.

Lillian had risen slowly, and as he neared her she held out her hand.

"Jack," she exclaimed softly, "how sweet of you to remember!"

The voice of familiarity, and as they came one uncertainty passed forever from his mind—the question as to what relation she and Chilcote held to each other. With the realization came the thought of Eve, and in the midst

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