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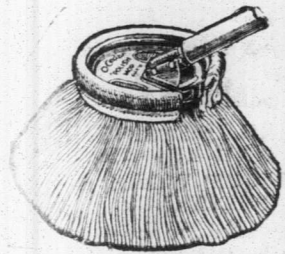
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The MASQUERADER

By Katherine Cecil Thurston, Author of "The Circle," Etc. Copyright, 1904, by Harper & Brothers

She looked up at him. "You're always nicer when you smoke," she persisted encouragingly. "Light a cigarette—and give me one."

"No; now. You want to find out why this Englishman from Italy was at your sister's party and why he disappeared?"

There are times when a malignant obstinacy seems to affect certain people. The only answer Lillian made was to pass her hand over Loder's waistcoat and, feeling his cigarette case, to draw it from the pocket.

He affected not to see it. "Do you think he recognized you in that tent?" he insisted desperately.

She held out the case. "Here are your cigarettes. You know we're always more social when we smoke."

In the short interval while she looked up into his face several ideas passed through Loder's mind. He thought of standing up suddenly and so regaining his advantage. He wondered quickly whether one hand could possibly suffice for the taking out and lighting of two cigarettes. Then all need for speculation was pushed suddenly aside.

Lillian, looking into his face, saw his fresh look of disturbance, and from long experience again changed her tactics. Loder's cigarette case on the touch, she put one hand on his shoulder, the other on his left arm. Hundreds of times this caressing touch had quieted Chilcote.

"Dear old boy!" she said soothingly, her hand moving slowly down his arm. In a flash of understanding the consequences of this position came to him. Action was imperative, at whatever risk. With an abrupt gesture he rose.

The movement was awkward. He got to his feet precipitately. Lillian drew back, surprised and startled, catching involuntarily at his left hand to steady her position.

Her fingers grasped at, then held his. He made no effort to release them. With a dogged acknowledgment, he admitted himself worsted.

How long she stayed immovable, holding his hand, neither of them knew. The process of a woman's instinct is so subtle, so obscure, that it would be futile to apply it to the commonplace test of time. She kept her hand tensely, as though his fingers possessed some peculiar virtue. Then at last she spoke.

"Rings, Jack?" she said very slowly. And under the two short words a whole world of incredulity and surmise made itself felt.

Loder laughed. At the sound she dropped his hand and rose from her knees. What her suspicions, what her instincts were she could not have clearly defined, but her action was unhesitating. Without a moment's uncertainty she turned to the fireplace, pressed the electric button and flooded the room with light.

There is no force so demoralizing as unexpected light. Loder took a step backward, his hand hanging unguarded by his side, and Lillian, stepping forward, caught it again before he could protest. Lifting it quickly, she looked scrutinizingly at the two rings.

All women jump to conclusions, and it is extraordinary how seldom they jump short. Seeing only what Lillian saw, knowing only what she knew, no man would have staked a definite opinion, but the other sex takes a different view. As she stood gazing at the rings her thoughts and her conclusions sped through her mind like arrows—all aimed and all tending toward one point. She remembered the day when she and Chilcote had talked of doubles, her skepticism and his vehement defense of the idea, his sudden interest in the book "Other Men's Shoes," and his anathema against life and its irksome round of duties. She remembered her own first convinced recognition of the eyes that had looked at her in the doorway of her sister's house, and, last of all, she remembered Chilcote's unaccountable avoidance of the same subject of likeness when she had mentioned it yesterday driving through the park, and with it his unnecessarily curt repudiation of his former opinions. She reviewed each item, then she raised her head slowly and looked at Loder.

He was prepared for the glance and met it steadily. In the long moment that her eyes searched his face it was she and not he who changed color. She was the first to speak. "You were the man whose hands I saw in the tent," she said. She made the statement in her usual soft tones, but a slight tremor of excitement underlaid her voice. Poodles, Persian kittens, even crying gazling hells, seemed very far away in face of this tangible, fabulous, present interest. "You are not Jack Chilcote," she said very slowly. "You are wearing his clothes and speaking in his voice, but you are not Jack Chilcote." Her tone quickened with a touch of excitement. "You needn't keep silent and look at me," she said. "I know quite well what I am saying, though I don't understand it, though I have no real proof"—She paused, momentarily disconcerted by her companion's silent and steady gaze, and in the pause a curious and unexpected thing occurred.

Loder laughed suddenly—a full, confident, reassured laugh. All the while that the past half hour had spun about him, all the intolerable sense of an im-

pending crash, lifted suddenly. He saw his way clearly, and it was Lillian who had opened his eyes.

Still looking at her, he smiled—a smile of radiant determination, such as Chilcote had never worn in his life. And with a calm gesture he released his hand.

"The greatest charm of woman is her imagination," he said quietly. "Without it there would be no color in life; we would come into and drop out of it with the same uninteresting tone of drab reality." He paused and smiled again.

At his smile Lillian involuntarily drew back, the color deepening in her cheeks. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

He lifted his head. With each moment he felt more certain of himself. "Because that is my attitude," he said. "As a man I admire your imagination, but as a man I fail to follow your reasoning."

The words and the tone both stung her. "Do you realize the position?" she asked sharply. "Do you realize that, whatever your plans are, I can spoil them?"

Loder still met her eyes. "I realize nothing of the sort," he said. "Then you admit that you are not Jack Chilcote?"

"I neither deny nor admit. My identity still offers my congratulations. I still offer my congratulations. I still offer my congratulations. I still offer my congratulations."

"But you do admit—to me, that you are not Jack?"

"I deny nothing—and admit nothing. I still offer my congratulations. I still offer my congratulations. I still offer my congratulations. I still offer my congratulations."

"Upon what?"

"The same possession—your imagination."

Lillian stamped her foot. Then by a quick effort she conquered her temper. "Prove me to be wrong!" she said, with a fresh touch of excitement.

"Take off your rings and let me see your hands."

With a deliberate gesture Loder put his hand behind his back. "I never gratify childish curiosity," he said, with another smile.

Again a flash of temper crossed her eyes. "Are you sure," she said, "that it's quite wise to talk like that?"

Loder laughed again. "Is that a threat?"

"Perhaps."

"Then it's an empty one."

"Why?"

Before replying he waited a moment, looking down at her.

(To be continued.)

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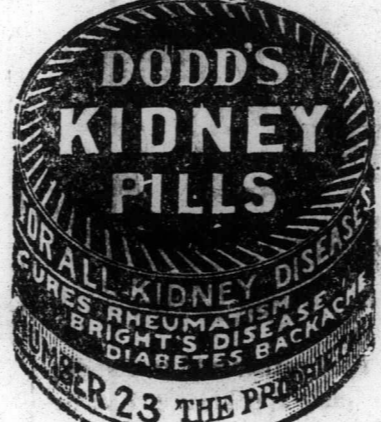
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