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The MASQUERADER

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

"When you went up to your rooms?" Loder strove hard to keep his control. "To my room?" Oh, yes, I forgot about that. I forgot about the night!" He hesitated, confusedly. "All I remember is the coming down to breakfast next morning—this morning—at 12 o'clock!"

Loder turned to the table and poured himself out some whisky. "Yes," he acquiesced in a very quiet voice. "At the word Chilcote rose from his seat. His disquietude was very evident. "Oh, there was breakfast on the table when I came downstairs—breakfast, with flowers and a horrible, dazzling glare of sun. It was then, Loder, as I stood and looked into the room, that the impossibility of it all came to me—that I knew I couldn't stand it—couldn't go on!"

Loder swallowed his whisky slowly. His sense of overpowering curiosity held him very still, but he made no effort to prompt his companion. Again Chilcote shifted his position agitatedly. "It had to be done," he said disjunctively. "I had to do it—then and there. The things were on the bureau—the pens and ink and telegraph forms. They tempted me."

Loder laid down his glass suddenly. An exclamation rose to his lips, but he checked it. At the slight sound of the tumbler touching the table Chilcote turned, but there was no expression on the other's face to frighten him. "They tempted me," he repeated hastily. "They seemed like magnets; they seemed to draw me toward them. I sat at the bureau staring at them for a long time. Then a terrible compulsion seized me—something you could never understand—and I caught up the nearest pen and wrote just what was in my mind. It wasn't a telegram, properly speaking. It was more a letter. I wanted you back, and I had to make myself plain. The writing of the message seemed to steady me; the mere forming of the words quieted my mind. I was almost cool when I got up from the bureau and pressed the bell!"

"The bell?" "Yes, I rang for a servant. I had to send the wire myself, so I had to get a cab." His voice rose to irritability. "I pressed the bell several times, but the thing had gone wrong; 'twouldn't work. At last I gave it up and went into the corridor to call some one."

"Well?" In the intense suspense of the moment the word escaped Loder. "Oh, I went out of the room, but there at the door, before I could call anybody, I knocked up against that idiot Greening. He was looking for me—for you, rather—about some beastly work affair. I tried to explain that I wasn't in a state for business. I tried to shake him off, but he was worse than Blessington! At last, to be rid of the fellow, I went with him to the study!"

"But the telegram?" Loder began. Then again he checked himself. "Yes—yes—I understand," he added quietly. "I'm getting to the telegram! I wish you wouldn't jar me with sudden questions. I wasn't in the study more than a minute more than five or six minutes"—His voice became confused, the strain of the connected recital was telling upon him. With nervous haste he made a rush for the end of his story. "I wasn't more than seven or eight



"Loder, what are you going to do?" minutes in the study; then, as I came downstairs Crampham met me in the hall. He told me that Lillian Astrupp had called and wished to see me and that he had shown her into the morning room!"

"The morning room?" Loder suddenly stepped back from the table. "The morning room? With your telegram lying on the bureau?" His sudden speech and movement startled Chilcote. The blood rushed to his face, then died out, leaving it ashen. "Don't do that, Loder!" he cried. "I—I can't bear it!"

With an immense effort Loder controlled himself. "Sorry," he said. "Go on!" "I'm going on. I tell you I'm going on! I got a horrid shock when Crampham told me. Your story came clattering through my mind. I knew Lillian

had come to see you. I knew there was going to be a scene." "But the telegram! The telegram!" Chilcote paid no heed to the interruption. He was following his own train of ideas. "I knew she had come to see you. I knew there was going to be a scene. When I got to the morning room my hand was shaking so that I could scarcely turn the handle; then, as the door opened, I could have cried out with relief. Eve was there as well!"

"Eve?" "Yes, I don't think I was ever so glad to see her in my life." He laughed almost hysterically. "I was quite civil to her, and she was—quite sweet to me"—Again he laughed.

Loder's lips tightened. "Yes," he said. "It saved the situation. Even if Lillian wanted to be nasty, she couldn't while Eve was there. We talked for about ten minutes. We were quite an amiable trio. Then Lillian told me why she'd called. She wanted me to make a fourth in a theater party at the Arcadian tonight, and I—I was so pleased and so relieved that I said yes!" He paused and laughed again unsteadily.

In his tense anxiety Loder ground his heel into the floor. "Go on!" he said fiercely. "Go on!"

"Don't!" Chilcote exclaimed. "I'm going on—I'm going on." He passed his handkerchief across his lips. "We talked for ten minutes or so, and then Lillian left. I went with her to the hall door, but Crampham was there too—so I was still safe. She laughed and chatted and seemed in high spirits as we crossed the hall, and she was still smiling as she waved to me from her motor. But then, Loder—then, as I stood in the hall, it all came to me suddenly. I remembered that Lillian must have been alone in the morning room before Eve found her! I remembered the telegram! I ran back to the room, meaning to question Eve as to how long Lillian had been alone, but she had left the room. I ran to the bureau—but the telegram wasn't there!"

"Gone?" "Yes, gone. That's why I've come straight here."

For a moment they confronted each other. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, Loder pushed Chilcote aside and crossed the room. An instant later the heavy pulling out of drawers and moving of boxes came from the bedroom.

Chilcote, shaken and nervous, stood for a minute where his companion had left him. At last, impelled by curiosity, he too crossed the narrow passage and entered the second room. The full light streamed in through the open window; the keen spring air blew freshly across the hotspots, and on the window sill a band of grimy, joyous sparrows twittered and preened themselves. In the middle of the room stood Loder. His coat was off, and round him on chairs and floor lay an array of waistcoats, gloves and ties.

For a space Chilcote stood in the doorway staring at him, then his lips parted and he took a step forward. "Loder," he said anxiously, "Loder, what are you going to do?" Loder turned. His shoulders were stiff, his face alight with energy. "I'm going back," he said, "to unravel the tangle you have made."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Loder's plan of action was arrived at before he reached Trafalgar square. The facts of the case were simple. Chilcote had left an incriminating telegram on the bureau in the morning room at Grosvenor square. By an unlucky chance Lillian Astrupp had been shown up into that room, where she had remained alone until the moment that Eve, either by request or by accident, had found her there. The facts resolved themselves into one question: What use had Lillian made of those solitary moments? Without deviation, Loder's mind turned toward one answer. Lillian was not the woman to lose an opportunity, whether the space at her command was long or short.

So convinced was he that, reaching Trafalgar square, he stopped and hailed a hansom. "Cadogan gardens," he called. "No. 33."

The moments seemed very few before the cab drew up beside the curb and he caught his second glimpse of the enameled door with its silver fittings. Instantly he pressed the bell the door was opened by Lillian's discreet, deferential manservant.

"Is Lady Astrupp at home?" he asked.

The man looked thoughtful. "Her ladyship lunched at home, sir"—he began cautiously.

But Loder interrupted him. "Ask her to see me," he said laconically. The servant expressed no surprise. His only comment was to throw the door wide.

"If you'll wait in the white room, sir," he said, "I'll inform her ladyship." Chilcote was evidently a frequent and a favored visitor.

In this manner Loder for the second time entered the house so unfamiliar—and yet so familiar to him—that it suggested. Entering the drawing room, he had leisure to look about him. It was a beautiful room, large and lofty. Luxury was evident on every hand, but it was not the luxury that palls or offends. Each object was graceful and possessed its own intrinsic value. The atmosphere was too effeminate to appeal to him, but he acknowledged the taste and artistic delicacy it conveyed. Almost at the moment of acknowledgment the door opened to admit Lillian. "I thought it would be you," she said indignantly.

Loder came forward. "You expected me?" he said guardedly. A sudden conviction filled him that it was not

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the evidence of her eyes, but something at once subtler and more definite that prompted her recognition of him.

She smiled. "Why should I expect you? On the contrary, I'm waiting to know why you're here?" "He was silent for an instant. Then he answered in his own light tone. "As far as that goes," he said, "let's make it my duty call—having dined with you I'm an old-fashioned person."

For a full second she surveyed him amusedly. Then at last she spoke. "My dear Jack"—she laid particular stress on the name—"I never imagined you so much of a bohemian. I should have thought bohemian would have been more the word."

Loder felt disconcerted and annoyed. Either, like himself, she was fishing for information or she was deliberately playing with him. In his perplexity he glanced across the room toward the fireplace.

Lillian saw the look. "Won't you sit down?" she said, indicating the couch. "I promise not to make you smoke. I shan't even ask you to take off your gloves!"

Loder made no movement. His mind was unpleasantly upset. It was nearly a fortnight since he had seen Lillian, and in the interval her attitude had changed, and the change puzzled him. It might mean the philosophy of a woman who, knowing herself without adequate weapons, withdraws from a combat that has proved fruitless, or it might imply the merely catlike desire to toy with a certainty. He looked quickly at the delicate face, the green eyes somewhat obliquely set, the unreliable mouth, and instantly he inclined to the latter theory. The conviction that she possessed the telegram filled him suddenly, and with it came the desire to put his belief to the test—to know beyond question whether her smiling unconcern meant malice or mere entertainment.

"When you first came into the room," he said quietly, "you said, 'I thought it would be you.' Why did you say that?" Again she smiled—the smile that might be malicious or might be merely amused. "Oh," she answered at last. "I only meant that though I had been told Jack Chilcote wanted me, it wasn't Jack Chilcote I expected to see!"

After her statement there was a pause. Loder's position was difficult. Instinctively convinced that, strong in the possession of her proof, she was enjoying his tautalized discomfort, he yet craved the actual evidence that should set his suspicions to rest. Acting upon the desire, he made a new beginning. "Do you know why I came?" he asked.

Lillian looked up innocently. "It's so hard to be certain of anything in this world," she said. "But one is always at liberty to guess." Again he was perplexed. Her attitude was not quite the attitude of one who controls the game, and yet—He looked at her with a puzzled scrutiny. Women for him had always spelled the incomprehensible. He was at his best, his strongest, his surest, in the presence of men. Feeling his disadvantage, yet determined to gain his end, he made a last attempt.

"How did you amuse yourself at Grosvenor square this morning before Eve came to you?" he asked. The effort was awkwardly blunt, but it was direct.

Lillian was buttoning her glove. She did not raise her head as she spoke, but her fingers paused in their task. For a second she remained motionless; then she looked up slowly.

"Oh," she said sweetly, "so I was right in my guess? You did come to find out whether I sat in the morning room with my hands in my lap or wandered about in search of entertainment?"

Loder colored with annoyance and apprehension. Every look, every tone, of Lillian's was distasteful to him. No more fully to him than did his own eyesight. But it was not the moment for personal antipathies; there were other interests than his own at stake. With new resolution he returned her glance.

"Then I must still ask my first question. Why did you say, 'I thought it would be you?' His gaze was direct—so direct that it disconcerted her. She laughed a little uneasily. "Because I knew."

"How did you know?"

(To be continued.)

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