

THE MASQUERADER

lips set nervously in a conflict of emotions. For a space he stayed very still, avoiding Loder's eyes; then, as if decision had suddenly come to him, he turned and met his gaze.

"How if there was a future," he said, "as well as a past?"

V

FOR the space of a minute there was silence in the room, then outside in the still night three clocks simultaneously chimed eleven, and their announcement was taken up and echoed by half a dozen others, loud and faint, hoarse and resonant; for all through the hours of darkness the neighborhood of Fleet Street is alive with chimes.

Chilcote, startled by the jangle, rose from his seat; then, as if driven by an uncontrollable impulse, he spoke again.

"You probably think I am mad—" he began.

Loder took his pipe out of his mouth. "I am not so presumptuous," he said, quietly.

For a space the other eyed him silently, as if trying to gauge his thoughts; then once more he broke into speech.

"Look here," he said. "I came to-night to make a proposition. When I have made it you'll first of all jeer at it—as I jeered when I made it to myself; then you'll see its possibilities—as I did; then"—he paused and glanced round the room nervously—"then you'll accept it—as I did." In the uneasy haste of his speech his words broke off almost unintelligibly.

Involuntarily Loder lifted his head to retort, but Chilcote put up his hand. His face was set with the obstinate determination that weak men sometimes exhibit.

THE MASQUERADER

"Before I begin I want to say that I am not drunk—that I am neither mad nor drunk." He looked fully at his companion with his restless glance. "I am quite sane—quite reasonable."

Again Loder essayed to speak, but again he put up his hand.

"No. Hear me out. You told me something of your story. I'll tell you something of mine. You'll be the first person, man or woman, that I have confided in for ten years. You say you have been treated shabbily. I have treated myself shabbily—which is harder to reconcile. I had every chance—and I chucked every chance away."

There was a strained pause, then again Loder lifted his head.

"Morphia?" he said, very quietly.

Chilcote wheeled round with a scared gesture. "How did you know that?" he asked, sharply.

The other smiled. "It wasn't guessing—it wasn't even deduction. You told me, or as good as told me, in the fog—when we talked of Lexington. You were unstrung that night, and I— Well, perhaps one gets over-observant from living alone." He smiled again.

Chilcote collapsed into his former seat and passed his handkerchief across his forehead.

Loder watched him for a space; then he spoke. "Why don't you pull up?" he said. "You are a young man still. Why don't you drop the thing before it gets too late?" His face was unsympathetic, and below the question in his voice lay a note of hardness.

Chilcote returned his glance. The suggestion of re-

THE MASQUERADER

proof had accentuated his pallor. Under his excitement he looked ill and worn.

"You might talk till doomsday, but every word would be wasted," he said, irritably. "I'm past praying for, by something like six years."

"Then why come here?" Loder was pulling hard on his pipe. "I'm not a dealer in sympathy."

"I don't require sympathy." Chilcote rose again. He was still agitated, but the agitation was quieter. "I want a much more expensive thing than sympathy—and I am willing to pay for it."

The other turned and looked at him. "I have no possession in the world that would be worth a fiver to you," he said, coldly. "You're either under a delusion or you're wasting my time."

Chilcote laughed nervously. "Wait," he said. "Wait. I only ask you to wait. First let me sketch you my position—it won't take many words:

"My grandfather was a Chilcote of Westmoreland; he was one of the first of his day and his class to recognize that there was a future in trade, so, breaking his own little twig from the family tree, he went south to Wark and entered a ship-owning firm. In thirty years' time he died, the owner of one of the biggest trades in England, having married the daughter of his chief. My father was twenty-four and still at Oxford when he inherited. Almost his first act was to reverse my grandfather's early move by going north and piecing together the family friendship. He married his first cousin; and then, with the Chilcote prestige revived and the shipping money to back it, he entered on his ambition, which was to represent East Wark in the Conservative interest. It was a big fight, but he

THE MASQUERADER

won—as much by personal influence as by any other. He was an aristocrat, but he was a keen business-man as well. The combination carries weight with your lower classes. He never did much in the House, but he was a power to his party in Wark. They still use his name there to conjure with.”

Loder leaned forward interestedly.

“Robert Chilcote?” he said. “I have heard of him. One of those fine, unostentatious figures—strong in action, a little narrow in outlook, perhaps, but essential to a country’s staying power. You have every reason to be proud of your father.”

Chilcote laughed suddenly. “How easily we sum up, when a matter is impersonal! My father may have been a fine figure, but he shouldn’t have left me to climb to his pedestal.”

Loder’s eyes questioned. In his newly awakened interest he had let his pipe go out.

“Don’t you grasp my meaning?” Chilcote went on. “My father died and I was elected for East Wark. You may say that if I had no real inclination for the position I could have kicked. But I tell you I couldn’t. Every local interest, political and commercial, hung upon the candidate being a Chilcote. I did what eight men out of ten would have done. I yielded to pressure.”

“It was a fine opening!” The words escaped Loder.

“Most prisons have wide gates!” Chilcote laughed again unpleasantly. “That was six years ago. I had started on the morphia tack four years earlier, but up to my father’s death I had it under my thumb—or believed I had; and in the realization of my new responsi-

THE MASQUERADER

bilities and the excitement of the political fight I almost put it aside. For several months after I entered Parliament I worked. I believe I made one speech that marked me as a coming man.” He laughed derisively. “I even married—”

“Married?”

“Yes. A girl of nineteen—the ward of a great statesman. It was a brilliant marriage—politically as well as socially. But it didn’t work. I was born without the capacity for love. First the social life palled on me; then my work grew irksome. There was only one factor to make life endurable—morphia. Before six months were out I had fully admitted that.”

“But your wife?”

“Oh, my wife knew nothing—knows nothing. It is the political business, the beastly routine of the political life, that is wearing me out.” He stopped nervously, then hurried on again. “I tell you it’s hell to see the same faces, to sit in the same seat day in, day out, knowing all the time that you must hold yourself in hand, must keep your grip on the reins—”

“It is always possible to apply for the Chiltern Hundreds.”

“To retire? Possible to retire?” Chilcote broke into a loud, sarcastic laugh. “You don’t know what the local pressure of a place like Wark stands for. Twenty times I have been within an ace of chucking the whole thing. Once last year I wrote privately to Vale, one of our big men there, and hinted that my health was bad. Two hours after he had read my letter he was in my study. Had I been in Greenland the result would have been the same. No. Resignation is a meaningless word to a man like me.”

THE MASQUERADER

Loder looked down. "I see," he said, slowly, "I see."

"Then you see everything—the difficulty, the isolation of the position. Five years ago—three—even two years ago—I was able to endure it; now it gets more unbearable with every month. The day is bound to come when—when"—he paused, hesitating nervously—"when it will be physically impossible for me to be at my post."

Loder remained silent.

"Physically impossible," Chilcote repeated, excitedly. "Until lately I was able to calculate—to count upon myself to some extent; but yesterday I received a shock—yesterday I discovered that—that"—again he hesitated painfully—"that I have passed the stage when one may calculate."

The situation was growing more embarrassing. To hide its awkwardness, Loder moved back to the grate and rebuilt the fire, which had fallen low.

Chilcote, still excited by his unusual vehemence, followed him, taking up a position by the mantelpiece.

"Well?" he said, looking down.

Very slowly Loder rose from his task. "Well?" he reiterated.

"Have you nothing to say?"

"Nothing, except that your story is unique, and that I suppose I am flattered by your confidence." His voice was intentionally brusque.

Chilcote paid no attention to the voice. Taking a step forward, he laid his fingers on the lapel of Loder's coat.

"I have passed the stage where I can count upon

THE MASQUERADER

myself," he said, "and I want to count upon somebody else. I want to keep my place in the world's eyes and yet be free—"

Loder drew back involuntarily, contempt struggling with bewilderment in his expression.

Chilcote lifted his head. "By an extraordinary chance," he said, "you can do for me what no other man in creation could do. It was suggested to me unconsciously by the story of a book—a book in which men change identities. I saw nothing in it at the time, but this morning, as I lay in bed, sick with yesterday's fiasco, it came back to me—it rushed over my mind in an inspiration. It will save me—and make you. I'm not insulting you, though you'd like to think so."

Without remark Loder freed himself from the other's touch and walked back to his desk. His anger, his pride, and, against his will, his excitement were all aroused.

He sat down, leaned his elbow on the desk, and took his face between his hands. The man behind him undoubtedly talked madness; but after five years of dreary sanity madness had a fascination. Against all reason it stirred and roused him. For one instant his pride and his anger faltered before it, then common-sense flowed back again and adjusted the balance.

"You propose," he said, slowly, "that for a consideration of money I should trade on the likeness between us—and become your dummy, when you are otherwise engaged?"

Chilcote colored. "You are unpleasantly blunt," he said.

"But I have caught your meaning?"

"In the rough, yes."

THE MASQUERADER

Loder nodded curtly. "Then take my advice and go home," he said. "You're unhinged."

The other returned his glance, and as their eyes met Loder was reluctantly compelled to admit that, though the face was disturbed, it had no traces of insanity.

"I make you a proposal," Chilcote repeated, nervously but with distinctness. "Do you accept?"

For an instant Loder was at a loss to find a reply sufficiently final. Chilcote broke in upon the pause.

"After all," he urged, "what I ask of you is a simple thing. Merely to carry through my routine duties for a week or two occasionally when I find my endurance giving way—when a respite becomes essential. The work would be nothing to a man in your state of mind, the pay anything you like to name." In his eagerness he had followed Loder to the desk. "Won't you give me an answer? I told you I am neither mad nor drunk."

Loder pushed back the scattered papers that lay under his arm.

"Only a lunatic would propose such a scheme," he said, brusquely and without feeling.

"Why?"

The other's lips parted for a quick retort; then in a surprising way the retort seemed to fail him. "Oh, because the thing isn't feasible, isn't practicable from any point of view."

Chilcote stepped closer. "Why?" he insisted.

"Because it couldn't work, man! Couldn't hold for a dozen hours."

Chilcote put out his hand and touched his arm. "But why?" he urged. "Why? Give me one unanswerable reason."

THE MASQUERADER

Loder shook off the hand and laughed, but below his laugh lay a suggestion of the other's excitement. Again the scene stirred him against his sounder judgment; though his reply, when it came, was firm enough.

"As for reasons—" he said. "There are a hundred, if I had time to name them. Take it, for the sake of supposition, that I were to accept your offer. I should take my place in your house at—let us say at dinner-time. Your man gets me into your evening-clothes, and there, at the very start, you have the first suspicion set up. He has probably known you for years—known you until every turn of your appearance, voice, and manner is far more familiar to him than it is to you. There are no eyes like a servant's."

"I have thought of that. My servant and my secretary can both be changed. I will do the thing thoroughly."

Loder glanced at him in surprise. The madness had more method than he had believed. Then, as he still looked, a fresh idea struck him, and he laughed.

"You have entirely forgotten one thing," he said. "You can hardly dismiss your wife."

"My wife doesn't count."

Again Loder laughed. "I'm afraid I scarcely agree. The complications would be slightly—slightly—" He paused.

Chilcote's latent irritability broke out suddenly. "Look here," he said, "this isn't a chaffing matter. It may be moonshine to you, but it's reality to me."

Again Loder took his face between his hands.

"Don't ridicule the idea. I'm in dead earnest."

Loder said nothing.

"Think—think it over before you refuse."

THE MASQUERADER

For a moment Loder remained motionless; then he rose suddenly, pushing back his chair.

"Tush, man! You don't know what you say. The fact of your being married bars it. Can't you see that?"

Again Chilcote caught his arm.

"You misunderstand," he said. "You mistake the position. I tell you my wife and I are nothing to each other. She goes her way; I go mine. We have our own friends, our own rooms. Marriage, actual marriage, doesn't enter the question. We meet occasionally at meals, and at other people's houses; sometimes we go out together for the sake of appearances; beyond that, nothing. If you take up my life, nobody in it will trouble you less than Eve—I can promise that." He laughed unsteadily.

Loder's face remained unmoved.

"Even granting that," he said, "the thing is still impossible."

"Why?"

"There is the House. The position there would be untenable. A man is known there as he is known in his own club." He drew away from Chilcote's touch.

"Very possibly. Very possibly." Chilcote laughed quickly and excitedly. "But what club is without its eccentric member? I am glad you spoke of that. I am glad you raised that point. It was a long time ago that I hit upon a reputation for moods as a shield for— for other things, and, the more useful it has become, the more I have let it grow. I tell you you might go down to the House to-morrow and spend the whole day without speaking to, even nodding to, a single man, and as long as you were I to outward appearances no one would raise an eyebrow. In the same way you might

THE MASQUERADER

vote in my place, ask a question, make a speech if you wanted to—"

At the word speech Loder turned involuntarily. For a fleeting second the coldness of his manner dropped and his face changed.

Chilcote, with his nervous quickness of perception, saw the alteration, and a new look crossed his own face.

"Why not?" he said, quickly. "You once had ambitions in that direction. Why not renew the ambitions?"

"And drop back from the mountains into the gutter?" Loder smiled and slowly shook his head.

"Better to live for one day than to exist for a hundred!" Chilcote's voice trembled with anxiety. For the third time he extended his hand and touched the other.

This time Loder did not shake off the detaining hand; he scarcely seemed to feel its pressure.

"Look here." Chilcote's fingers tightened. "A little while ago you talked of influence. Here you can step into a position built by influence. You might do all you once hoped to do—"

Loder suddenly lifted his head. "Absurd!" he said. "Absurd! Such a scheme was never carried through."

"Precisely why it will succeed. People never suspect until they have a precedent. Will you consider it? At least consider it. Remember, if there is a risk, it is I who am running it. On your own showing, you have no position to jeopardize."

The other laughed curtly.

"Before I go to-night will you promise me to consider it?"

THE MASQUERADER

"No."

"Then you will send me your decision by wire tomorrow. I won't take your answer now."

Loder freed his arm abruptly. "Why not?" he asked.

Chilcote smiled nervously. "Because I know men—and men's temptations. We are all very strong till the quick is touched; then we all wince. It's morphia with one man, ambitions with another. In each case it's only a matter of sooner or later." He laughed in his satirical, unstrung way, and held out his hand. "You have my address," he said. "Au revoir."

Loder pressed the hand and dropped it. "Good-bye," he said, meaningly. Then he crossed the room quietly and held the door open. "Good-bye," he said again as the other passed him.

As he crossed the threshold, Chilcote paused. "Au revoir," he corrected, with emphasis.

Until the last echo of his visitor's steps had died away Loder stood with his hand on the door; then, closing it quietly, he turned and looked round the room. For a considerable space he stood there as if weighing the merits of each object; then very slowly he moved to one of the book-shelves, drew out May's *Parliamentary Practice*, and, carrying it to the desk, readjusted the lamp.

VI

ALL the next day Chilcote moved in a fever of excitement. Hot with hope one moment, cold with fever the next, he rushed with restless energy into every task that presented itself—only to drop it as speedily. Twice during the morning he drove to the entrance of Clifford's Inn, but each time his courage failed him and he returned to Grosvenor Square—to learn that the expected message from Loder had not come.

It was a wearing condition of mind; but at worst it was scarcely more than an exaggeration of what his state had been for months, and made but little obvious difference in his bearing or manner.

In the afternoon he took his place in the House, but, though it was his first appearance since his failure of two days ago, he drew but small personal notice. When he chose, his manner could repel advances with extreme effect, and of late men had been prone to draw away from him.

In one of the lobbies he encountered Fraide surrounded by a group of friends. With his usual furtive haste he would have passed on; but, moving away from his party, the old man accosted him. He was always courteously particular in his treatment of Chilcote, as the husband of his ward and godchild.

"Better, Chilcote?" he said, holding out his hand. At the sound of the low, rather formal tones, so