

THE MASQUERADER

shut me up. But I'll say just one thing—a thing that *will* get said. Try and keep your hold! Remember your responsibilities—and keep your hold!" He spoke energetically, looking earnestly into Chilcote's eyes. He did not realize it, but he was pleading for his own career.

Chilcote paled a little, as he always did in face of a reality. Then he extended his hand.

"My dear fellow," he said, with a touch of hauteur, "a man can generally be trusted to look after his own life."

Extricating his hand almost immediately, he turned towards the door and without a word of farewell passed into the little hall, leaving Loder alone in the sitting-room.

XII

ON the night of Chilcote's return to his own, Loder tasted the lees of life poignantly for the first time. Before their curious compact had been entered upon he had been, if not content, at least apathetic; but with action the apathy had been dispersed, never again to regain its old position.

He realized with bitter certainty that his was no real home-coming. On entering Chilcote's house he had experienced none of the unfamiliarity, none of the unsettled awkwardness, that assailed him now. There he had almost seemed the exile returning after many hardships; here, in the atmosphere made common by years, he felt an alien. It was illustrative of the man's character that sentimentalities found no place in his nature. Sentiments were not lacking, though they lay out of sight, but sentimentalities he altogether denied.

Left alone in the sitting-room after Chilcote's departure, his first sensation was one of physical discomfort and unfamiliarity. His own clothes, with their worn looseness, brought no sense of friendliness such as some men find in an old garment. Lounging, and the clothes that suggested lounging, had no appeal for him. In his eyes the garb that implies responsibility was symbolic and even inspiring.

And, as with clothes, so with his actual surround-

THE MASQUERADER

ings. Each detail of his room was familiar, but not one had ever become intimately close. He had used the place for years, but he had used it as he might use a hotel; and whatever of his household gods had come with him remained, like himself, on sufferance. His entrance into Chilcote's surroundings had been altogether different. Unknown to himself, he had been in the position of a young artist who, having roughly modelled in clay, is brought into the studio of a sculptor. To his outward vision everything is new, but his inner sight leaps to instant understanding. Amid all the strangeness he recognizes the one essential—the workshop, the atmosphere, the home.

On this first night of return Loder comprehended something of his position; and, comprehending, he faced the problem and fought with it.

He had made his bargain and must pay his share. Weighing this, he had looked about his room with a quiet gaze. Then at last, as if finding the object really sought for, his eyes had come round to the mantel-piece and rested on the pipe-rack. The pipes stood precisely as he had left them. He had looked at them for a long time, then an ironic expression that was almost a smile had touched his lips, and, crossing the room, he had taken the oldest and blackest from its place and slowly filled it with tobacco.

With the first indrawn breath of smoke his attitude had unbent. Without conscious determination, he had chosen the one factor capable of easing his mood. A cigarette is for the trivial moments of life; a cigar for its fulfilments, its pleasant, comfortable retrospections; but in real distress—in the solving of question, the fighting of difficulty—a pipe is man's eternal solace.

THE MASQUERADER

So he had passed the first night of his return to the actualities of life. Next day his mind was somewhat settled and outward aid was not so essential; but though facts faced him more solidly, they were nevertheless very drab in shade. The necessity for work, that blessed antidote to ennui, no longer forced him to endeavor. He was no longer penniless; but the money he possessed brought with it no desires. When a man has lived from hand to mouth for years, and suddenly finds himself with a hundred pounds in his pocket, the result is sometimes curious. He finds with a vague sense of surprise that he has forgotten how to spend. That extravagance, like other artificial passions, requires cultivation.

This he realized even more fully on the days that followed the night of his first return; and with it was born a new bitterness. The man who has friends and no money may find life difficult; but the man who has money and no friend to rejoice in his fortune or benefit by his generosity is aloof indeed. With the leaven of incredulity that works in all strong natures, Loder distrusted the professional beggar—therefore the charity that bestows easily and promiscuously was denied him; and of other channels of generosity he was too self-contained to have learned the secret.

When depression falls upon a man of usually even temperament it descends with a double weight. The mercurial nature has a hundred counterbalancing devices to rid itself of gloom—a sudden lifting of spirit, a memory of other moods lived through, other blacknesses dispersed by time; but the man of level nature has none of these. Depression, when it comes, is indeed depression; no phase of mind to be superseded

THE MASQUERADER

by another phase, but a slackening of all the chords of life.

It was through such a depression as this that he labored during three weeks, while no summons and no hint of remembrance came from Chilcote. His position was peculiarly difficult. He found no action in the present, and towards the future he dared not trust himself to look. He had slipped the old moorings that familiarity had rendered enduring; but having slipped them, he had found no substitute. Such was his case on the last night of the three weeks, and such his frame of mind as he crossed Fleet Street from Clifford's Inn to Middle Temple Lane.

It was scarcely seven o'clock, but already the dusk was falling; the greater press of vehicles had ceased, and the light of the street lamps gleamed back from the spaces of dry and polished roadway, worn smooth as a mirror by wheels and hoofs. Something of the solitude of night that sits so ill on the strenuous city street was making itself felt, though the throngs of people on the pathway still streamed eastward and westward and the taverns made a busy trade.

Having crossed the roadway, Loder paused for a moment to survey the scene. But humanity in the abstract made small appeal to him, and his glance wandered from the passers-by to the buildings massed like clouds against the dark sky. As his gaze moved slowly from one to the other a clock near at hand struck seven, and an instant later the chorus was taken up by a dozen clamorous tongues. Usually he scarcely heard, and never heeded, these innumerable chimes; but this evening their effect was strange. Coming out of the darkness, they seemed to possess a personal note,

THE MASQUERADER

a human declaration. The impression was fantastic, but it was strong; with a species of revolt against life and his own personality, he turned slowly and moved forward in the direction of Ludgate Hill.

For a space he continued his course, then, reaching Bouverie Street, he turned sharply to the right and made his way down the slight incline that leads to the Embankment. There he paused and drew a long breath. The sense of space and darkness soothed him. Pulling his cap over his eyes, he crossed to the river and walked on in the direction of Westminster Bridge.

As he walked the great mass of water by his side looked dense and smooth as oil with its sweeping width and network of reflected light. On its farther bank rose the tall buildings, the chimneys, the flaring lights that suggest another and an alien London; close at hand stretched the solid stone parapet, giving assurance of protection.

All these things he saw with his mental eyes, but with his mental eyes only, for his physical gaze was fixed ahead where the Houses of Parliament loomed out of the dusk. From the great building his eyes never wavered until the Embankment was traversed and Westminster Bridge reached. Then he paused, resting his arms on the coping of the bridge,

In the tense quietude of the darkness the place looked vast and inspiring. The shadowy Terrace, the silent river, the rows of lighted windows, each was significant. Slowly and comprehensively his glance passed from one to the other. He was no sentimentalist and no dreamer; his act was simply the act of a man whose interests, robbed of their natural outlet, turn instinctively towards the forms and symbols of

THE MASQUERADER

the work that is denied them. His scrutiny was steady—even cold. He was raised to no exaltation by the vastness of the building, nor was he chilled by any dwarfing of himself. He looked at it long and thoughtfully; then, again moving slowly, he turned and retraced his steps.

His mind was full as he walked back, still oblivious of the stone parapet of the Embankment, the bare trees, and the flaring lights of the advertisements across the water. Turning to the left, he regained Fleet Street and made for his own habitation with the quiet accuracy that some men exhibit in moments of absorption.

He crossed Clifford's Inn with the same slow, almost listless step; then, as his own doorway came into view, he stopped. Some one was standing in its recess.

For a moment he wondered if his fancy were playing him a trick; then his reason sprang to certainty with so fierce a leap that for an instant his mind recoiled. For we more often stand aghast at the strength of our own feelings than before the enormity of our neighbor's actions.

"Is that you, Chilcote?" he said, below his breath.

At the sound of his voice the other wheeled round. "Hallo!" he said. "I thought you were the ghost of some old inhabitant. I suppose I am very unexpected?"

Loder took the hand that he extended and pressed the fingers unconsciously. The sight of this man was like the finding of an oasis at the point where the desert is sandiest, deadliest, most unbearable.

"Yes, you are—unexpected," he answered.

Chilcote looked at him, then looked out into the court. "I'm done up," he said. "I'm right at the end

THE MASQUERADER

of the tether." He laughed as he said it, but in the dim light of the hall Loder thought his face looked ill and harassed despite the flush that the excitement of the meeting had brought to it. Taking his arm, he drew him towards the stairs.

"So the rope has run out, eh?" he said, in imitation of the other's tone. But under the quiet of his manner his own nerves were throbbing with the peculiar alertness of anticipation; a sudden sense of mastery over life, that lifted him above surroundings and above persons—a sense of stature, mental and physical, from which he surveyed the world. He felt as if fate, in the moment of utter darkness, had given him a sign.

As they crossed the hall, Chilcote had drawn away and was already mounting the stairs. And as Loder followed, it came sharply to his mind that here, in the slipshod freedom of a door that was always open and stairs that were innocent of covering, lay his companion's real niche—unrecognized in outward avowal, but acknowledged by the inward, keener sense that manifests the individual.

In silence they mounted the stairs, but on the first landing Chilcote paused and looked back, surveying Loder from the superior height of two steps.

"I did very well at first," he said. "I did very well—I almost followed your example, for a week or so. I found myself on a sort of pinnacle—and I clung on. But in the last ten days I've—I've rather lapsed."

"Why?" Loder avoided looking at his face; he kept his eyes fixed determinately on the spot where his own hand gripped the banister.

"Why?" Chilcote repeated. "Oh, the prehistoric tale—weakness stronger than strength. I'm—I'm

THE MASQUERADER

sorry to come down on you like this, but it's the social side that bowls me over. It's the social side I can't stick."

"The social side? But I thought—"

"Don't think. I never think; it entails such a constant upsetting of principles and theories. We did arrange for business only, but one can't set up barriers. Society pushes itself everywhere nowadays—into business most of all. I don't want you for theatre-parties or dinners. But a big reception with a political flavor is different. A man has to be seen at these things; he needn't say anything or do anything, but it's bad form if he fails to show up."

Loder raised his head. "You must explain," he said, abruptly.

Chilcote started slightly at the sudden demand.

"I—I suppose I'm rather irrelevant," he said, quickly. "Fact is, there's a reception at the Bramfells' to-night. You know Blanche Bramfell—Viscountess Bramfell, sister to Lillian Astrupp." His words conveyed nothing to Loder, but he did not consider that. All explanations were irksome to him and he invariably chafed to be done with them.

"And you've got to put in an appearance—for party reasons?" Loder broke in.

Chilcote showed relief. "Yes. Old Fraide makes rather a point of it—so does Eve." He said the last words carelessly; then, as if their sound recalled something, his expression changed. A touch of satirical amusement touched his lips and he laughed.

"By-the-way, Loder," he said, "my wife was actually tolerant of me for nine or ten days after my return. I thought your representation was to be quite imper-

THE MASQUERADER

sonal? I'm not jealous," he laughed. "I'm not jealous, I assure you; but the burned child shouldn't grow absent-minded."

At his tone and his laugh Loder's blood stirred; with a sudden, unexpected impulse his hand tightened on the banister, and, looking up, he caught sight of the face above him—his own face, it seemed, alight with malicious interest. At the sight a strange sensation seized him; his grip on the banister loosened, and, pushing past Chilcote, he hurriedly mounted the stairs.

Outside his own door the other overtook him.

"Loder!" he said. "Loder! I meant no harm. A man must have a laugh sometimes."

But Loder was facing the door and did not turn round.

A sudden fear shook Chilcote. "Loder!" he exclaimed again, "you wouldn't desert me? I can't go back to-night. I can't go back."

Still Loder remained immovable.

Alarmed by his silence, Chilcote stepped closer to him.

"Loder! Loder, you won't desert me?" He caught hastily at his arm.

With a quick repulsion Loder shook him off; then almost as quickly he turned round.

"What fools we all are!" he said, abruptly. "We only differ in degree. Come in, and let us change our clothes."