

THE MASQUERADER

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. Laying the cigarette-case on the couch, 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 to it the commonplace test of time. She kept her hold tenaciously, 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.

THE MASQUERADER

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 towards one point. She remembered the day when she and Chilcote had talked of doubles, her scepticism and his vehement defence 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 likenesses 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.

THE MASQUERADER

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 underran her voice. Poodles, Persian kittens, even crystal gazing-balls, 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 web that the past half-hour had spun about him, all the intolerable sense of an impending 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 reliant 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.

THE MASQUERADER

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 is obvious. I can get twenty men to swear to it at any moment that you like. The fact that I haven't worn rings till now will scarcely interest them."

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

"I deny nothing—and admit nothing. 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 hand."

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?"

THE MASQUERADER

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

"I conclude," he began, quietly, "that your idea is to spread this wild, improbable story—to ask people to believe that John Chilcote, whom they see before them, is not John Chilcote, but somebody else. Now you'll find that a harder task than you imagine. This is a sceptical world, and people are absurdly fond of their own eyesight. We are all journalists nowadays—we all want facts. The first thing you will be asked for is your proof. And what does your proof consist of? The circumstance that John Chilcote, who has always despised jewelry, has lately taken to wearing rings! Your own statement, unattended by any witnesses, that with those rings off his finger bears a scar belonging to another man! No; on close examination I scarcely imagine that your case would hold." He stopped, fired by his own logic. The future might be Chilcote's but the present was his; and this present—with its immeasurable possibilities—had been rescued from catastrophe. "No," he said, again. "When you get your proof perhaps we'll have another talk; but till then—"

"Till then?" She looked up quickly; but almost at once her question died away.

The door had opened, and the servant who had admitted Loder stood in the opening.

"Dinner is served!" he announced, in his deferential voice.