

## THE MASQUERADER

containing the tightly packed tabloids, he paused and glanced once more towards the bed. "How many?" he said, laconically.

Chilcote lifted his head. His face was pitifully drawn, but the feverish brightness in his eyes had increased. "Five," he said, sharply. "Five. Do you hear, Loder?"

"Five?" Involuntarily Loder lowered the hand that held the tube. From previous confidences of Chilcote's he knew the amount of morphia contained in each tabloid, and realized that five tabloids, if not an absolutely dangerous, was at least an excessive dose, even for one accustomed to the drug. For a moment his resolution failed; then the dominant note of his nature—the unconscious, fundamental egotism on which his character was based—asserted itself beyond denial. It might be reprehensible, it might even be criminal to accede to such a request, made by a man in such a condition of body and mind; yet the laws of the universe demanded self-assertion—prompted every human mind to desire, to grasp, and to hold. With a perception swifter than any he had experienced, he realized the certain respite to be gained by yielding to his impulse. He looked at Chilcote with his haggard, anxious expression, his eager, restless eyes; and a vision of himself followed sharp upon his glance. A vision of the untiring labor of the past ten days, of the slowly kindling ambition, of the supremacy all but gained. Then, as the picture completed itself, he lifted his hand with an abrupt movement and dropped the five tabloids one after another into the glass.

## XXV

HAVING taken a definite step in any direction, it was not in Loder's nature to wish it retraced. His face was set, but set with determination, when he closed the outer door of his own rooms and passed quietly down the stairs and out into the silent court. The thought of Chilcote, his pitiable condition, his sordid environments, were things that required a firm will to drive into the background of the imagination; but a whole inferno of such visions would not have daunted Loder on that morning as, unobserved by any eyes, he left the little court-yard with its grass, its trees, its pavement—all so distastefully familiar—and passed down the Strand towards life and action.

As he walked, his steps increased in speed and vigor. Now, for the first time, he fully appreciated the great mental strain that he had undergone in the past ten days—the unnatural tension; the suppressed, but perpetual, sense of impending recall; the consequently high pressure at which work, and even existence, had been carried on. And as he hurried forward the natural reaction to this state of things came upon him in a flood of security and confidence—a strong realization of the temporary respite and freedom for which no price would have seemed too high. The moment for which he had unconsciously lived ever since Chilcote's first memorable proposition

## THE MASQUERADER

was within reach at last—safeguarded by his own action.

The walk from Clifford's Inn to Grosvenor Square was long enough to dispel any excitement that his interview had aroused; and long before the well-known house came into view he felt sufficiently braced mentally and physically to seek Eve in the morning-room—where he instinctively felt she would still be waiting for him.

Thus he encountered and overpassed the obstacle that had so nearly threatened ruin; and, with the singleness of purpose that always distinguished him, he was able, once having passed it, to dismiss it altogether from his mind. From the moment of his return to Chilcote's house no misgiving as to his own action, no shadow of doubt, rose to trouble his mind. His feelings on the matter were quite simple. He had inordinately desired a certain opportunity; one factor had arisen to debar that opportunity, and he, claiming the right of strength, had set the barrier aside. In the simplicity of the reasoning lay its power to convince; and were a tonic needed to brace him for his task, he was provided with one in the masterful sense of a difficulty set at nought. For the man who has fought and conquered one obstacle feels strong to vanquish a score.

It was on this day, at the reassembling of Parliament, that Fraide's great blow was to be struck. In the ten days since the affair of the caravans had been reported from Persia public feeling had run high, and it was upon the pivot of this incident that Loder's attack was to turn; for, as Lakely was fond of remarking, "In the scales of public opinion, one dead Englishman

## THE MASQUERADER

has more weight than the whole Eastern Question!" It had been arranged that, following the customary procedure, Loder was to rise after questions at the morning sitting and ask leave to move the adjournment of the House on a definite matter of urgent public importance; upon which—leave having been granted by the rising of forty members in his support—the way was to lie open for his definite attack at the evening sitting. And it was with a mind attuned to this plan of action that he retired to the study immediately he had breakfasted, and settled to a final revision of his speech before an early party conference should compel him to leave the house. But here again circumstances were destined to change his programme. Scarcely had he sorted his notes and drawn his chair to Chilcote's desk than Renwick entered the room with the same air of important haste that he had shown on a previous occasion.

"A letter from Mr. Fraide, sir. But there's no answer," he said, with unusual brevity.

Loder waited till he had left the room, then he tore the letter open. He read:

"MY DEAR CHILCOTE,—Lakely is the recipient of special and very vital news from Meshed—unofficial, but none the less alarming. Acts of Russian aggression towards British traders are reported to be rapidly increasing, and it is stated that the authority of the Consulate is treated with contempt. Pending a possible confirmation of this, I would suggest that you keep an open mind on the subject of to-night's speech. By adopting an anticipatory—even an unprepared—attitude you may find your hand materially strengthened. I shall put my opinions before you more explicitly when we meet.

"Yours faithfully,

"HERBERT FRAIDE."

## THE MASQUERADER

The letter, worded with Fraide's usual restraint, made a strong impression on its recipient. The thought that his speech might not only express opinions already tacitly held, but voice a situation of intense and national importance, struck him with full force. For many minutes after he had grasped the meaning of Fraide's message he sat neglectful of his notes, his elbows resting on the desk, his face between his hands, stirred by the suggestion that here might lie a greater opportunity than any he had anticipated.

Still moved by this new suggestion, he attended the party conclave that Fraide had convened, and afterwards lunched with and accompanied his leader to the House. They spoke very little as they drove to Westminster, for each was engrossed by his own thoughts. Only once did Fraide allude to the incident that was paramount in both their minds. Then, turning to Loder with a smile of encouragement, he had laid his fingers for an instant on his arm.

"Chilcote," he had said, "when the time comes, remember you have all my confidence."

Looking back upon that day, Loder often wondered at the calmness with which he bore the uncertainty. To sit apparently unmoved, and wait without emotion for news that might change the whole tenor of one's action, would have tried the stoicism of the most experienced; to the novice it was wellnigh unendurable. And it was under these conditions, and fighting against these odds, that he sat through the long afternoon in Chilcote's place, obeying the dictates of his chief. But if the day was fraught with difficulties for him, it was fraught with dulness and disappointment for others; for the undercurrent of interest that had

## THE MASQUERADER

stirred at the Easter adjournment, and risen with added force on this first day of the new session, was gradually but surely threatened with extinction, as hour after hour passed, bringing no suggestion of the battle that had on every side been tacitly expected. Slowly and unmistakably speculation and dissatisfaction crept into the atmosphere of the House, as moment succeeded moment, and the Opposition made no sign. Was Fraide shirking the attack? Or was he playing a waiting game? Again and again the question arose, filling the air with a passing flicker of interest; but each time it sprang up only to die down again, as the ordinary business of the day dragged itself out.

Gradually, as the afternoon wore on, daylight began to fade. Loder, sitting rigidly in Chilcote's place, watched with suppressed inquiry the faces of the men who entered through the constantly swinging doors; but not one face, so eagerly scanned, carried the message for which he waited. Monotonously and mechanically the time passed. The Government, adopting a neutral attitude, carefully skirted all dangerous subjects; while the Opposition, acting under Fraide's suggestion, assisted rather than hindered the programme of postponement. For the moment the eagerly anticipated reassembling threatened dismal failure; and it was with a universal movement of weariness and relief that at last the House rose to dine.

But there are no possibilities so elastic as those of politics. At half-past seven the House rose in a spirit of boredom and disappointment; and at eight o'clock the lobbies, the dining-room, the entire space

## THE MASQUERADER

of the vast building, was stirred into activity by the arrival of a single telegraphic message.

The new development for which Fraide had waited came indeed, but it came with a force he had little anticipated. With a thrill of awe and consternation men heard and repeated the astounding news that—while personally exercising his authority on behalf of British traders—Sir William Brice-Field, Consul-General at Meshed, had been fired at by a Russian officer and instantly killed.

The interval immediately following the receipt of this news was too confused for detailed remembrance. Two ideas made themselves slowly felt—a deep horror that such an event could obtrude itself upon our high civilization, and a strong personal dismay that so honored, distinguished, and esteemed a representative as Sir William Brice-Field could have been allowed to meet death in so terrible a manner.

It was in the consciousness of this feeling—the consciousness that, in his own person, he might voice, not only the feelings of his party, but those of the whole country—that Loder rose an hour later to make his long-delayed attack.

He stood silent for a moment, as he had done on an earlier occasion; but this time his motive was different. Roused beyond any feeling of self-consciousness, he waited as by right for the full attention of the House; then quietly, but with self-possessed firmness, he moved the motion for adjournment.

Like a match to a train of powder, the words set flame to the excitement that had smouldered for weeks; and in an atmosphere of stirring activity, a scene of such tense and vital concentration as the House has

## THE MASQUERADER

rarely witnessed, he found inspiration for his great achievement.

To give Loder's speech in mere words would be little short of futile. The gift of oratory is too illusive, too much a matter of eye and voice and individuality, to allow of cold reproduction. To those who heard him speak on that night of April 18th the speech will require no recalling; and to those who did not hear him there would be no substitute in bare reproduction.

In the moment of action it mattered nothing to him that his previous preparations were to a great extent rendered useless by this news that had come with such paralyzing effect. In the sweeping consciousness of his own ability, he found added joy in the freedom it opened up. He ceased to consider that by fate he was a Conservative, bound by traditional conventionalities: in that great moment he knew himself sufficiently a man to exercise whatever individuality instinct prompted. He forgot the didactic methods by which he had proposed to show knowledge of his subject—both as a past and a future factor in European politics. With his own strong appreciation of present things, he saw and grasped the vast present interest lying beneath his hand.

For fifty minutes he held the interest of the House, speaking insistently, fearlessly, commandingly on the immediate need of action. He unhesitatingly pointed out that the news which had just reached England was not so much an appalling fact as a sinister warning to those in whose keeping lay the safety of the country's interests. Lastly, with a fine touch of eloquence, he paid tribute to the steadfast fidelity of such men as

## THE MASQUERADER

Sir William Brice-Field, who, whatever political complications arise at home, pursue their duty unswervingly on the outposts of the empire.

At his last words there was silence—the silence that marks a genuine effect—then all at once, with vehement, impressive force, the storm of enthusiasm broke its bounds.

It was one of those stupendous bursts of feeling that no etiquette, no decorum is powerful enough to quell. As he resumed his seat, very pale, but exalted as men are exalted only once or twice in a lifetime, it rose about him—clamorous, spontaneous, undeniable. Near at hand were the faces of his party, excited and triumphant; across the house were the faces of Sefborough and his Ministry, uncomfortable and disturbed.

The tumult swelled, then fell away; and in the partial lull that followed Fraide leaned over the back of his seat. His quiet, dignified expression was unaltered, but his eyes were intensely bright.

“Chilcote,” he whispered, “I don’t congratulate you—or myself. I congratulate the country on possessing a great man!”

The remaining features of the debate followed quickly one upon the other; the electric atmosphere of the House possessed a strong incentive power. Immediately Loder’s ovation had subsided, the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs rose and in a careful and non-incriminating reply defended the attitude of the Government.

Next came Fraide, who, in one of his rare and polished speeches, touched with much feeling upon his personal grief at the news reported from Persia, and made emphatic indorsement of Loder’s words.

## THE MASQUERADER

Following Fraide came one or two dissentient Liberals, and then Sefborough himself closed the debate. His speech was masterly and fluent; but though any disquietude he may have felt was well disguised under a tone of reassuring ease, the attempt to rehabilitate his position—already weakened in more than one direction—was a task beyond his strength.

Amid extraordinary excitement the division followed—and with it a Government defeat.

It was not until half an hour after the votes had been taken that Loder, freed at last from persistent congratulations, found opportunity to look for Eve. In accordance with a promise made that morning, he was to find her waiting outside the Ladies’ Gallery at the close of the debate.

Disengaging himself from the group of men who had surrounded and followed him down the lobby, he discarded the lift and ran up the narrow staircase. Reaching the landing, he went forward hurriedly; then with a certain abrupt movement he paused. In the doorway leading to the gallery Eve was waiting for him. The place was not brightly lighted, and she was standing in the shadow; but it needed only a glance to assure his recognition. He could almost have seen in the dark that night, so vivid were his perceptions. He took a step towards her, then again he stopped. In a second glance he realized that her eyes were bright with tears; and it was with the strangest sensation he had ever experienced that the knowledge flashed upon him. Here, also, he had struck the same note—the long-coveted note of supremacy. It had rung out full and clear as he stood in Chilcote’s place dominating

## THE MASQUERADER

the House; it had besieged him clamorously as he passed along the lobbies amid a sea of friendly hands and voices; now in the quiet of the deserted gallery it came home to him with deeper meaning from the eyes of Chilcote's wife.

Without a thought he put out his hands and caught hers.

"I couldn't get away," he said. "I'm afraid I'm very late."

With a smile that scattered her tears Eve looked up. "Are you?" she said, laughing a little. "I don't know what the time is. I scarcely know whether it's night or day."

Still holding one of her hands, he drew her down the stairs; but as they reached the last step she released her fingers.

"In the carriage!" she said, with another little laugh of nervous happiness.

At the foot of the stairs they were surrounded. Men whose faces Loder barely knew crowded about him. The intoxication of excitement was still in the air—the instinct that a new force had made itself felt, a new epoch been entered upon, stirred prophetically in every mind.

Passing through the enthusiastic concourse of men, they came unexpectedly upon Fraide and Lady Sarah surrounded by a group of friends. The old statesman came forward instantly, and, taking Loder's arm, walked with him to Chilcote's waiting brougham. He said little as they slowly made their way to the carriage, but the pressure of his fingers was tense and an unwonted color showed in his face. When Eve and Loder had taken their seats he stepped to the

## THE MASQUERADER

edge of the curb. They were alone for the moment, and, leaning close to the carriage, he put his hand through the open window. In silence he took Eve's fingers and held them in a long, affectionate pressure; then he released them and took Loder's hand.

"Good-night, Chilcote," he said. "You have proved yourself worthy of her. Good-night." He turned quickly and rejoined his waiting friends. In another second the horses had wheeled round, and Eve and Loder were carried swiftly forward into the darkness.

In the great moments of man's life woman comes before—and after. Some shadow of this truth was in Eve's mind as she lay back in her seat with closed eyes and parted lips. It seemed that life came to her now for the first time—came in the glad, proud, satisfying tide of things accomplished. This was her hour: and the recognition of it brought the blood to her face in a sudden, happy rush. There had been no need to precipitate its coming; it had been ordained from the first. Whether she desired it or no, whether she strove to draw it nearer or strove to ward it off, its coming had been inevitable. She opened her eyes suddenly and looked out into the darkness—the darkness throbbing with multitudes of lives, all awaiting, all desiring fulfilment. She was no longer lonely, no longer aloof; she was kin with all this pitiful, admirable, sinning, loving humanity. Again tears of pride and happiness filled her eyes. Then suddenly the thing she had waited for came to pass.

Loder leaned close to her. She was conscious of his nearer presence, of his strong, masterful personality. With a thrill that caught her breath, she felt his arm about her shoulder and heard the sound of his voice.

## THE MASQUERADER

"Eve," he said, "I love you. Do you understand? I love you." And drawing her close to him he bent and kissed her.

With Loder, to do was to do fully. When he gave, he gave generously; when he swept aside a barrier he left no stone standing. He had been slow to recognize his capacities—slower still to recognize his feelings. But now that the knowledge came he received it openly. In this matter of newly comprehended love he gave no thought to either past or future. That they loved and were alone was all he knew or questioned. She was as much Eve—the one woman—as though they were together in the primeval garden; and in that spirit he claimed her.

He neither spoke nor behaved extravagantly in that great moment of comprehension. He acted quietly, with the completeness of purpose that he gave to everything. He had found a new capacity within himself, and he was strong enough to dread no weakness in displaying it.

Holding her close to him, he repeated his declaration again and again, as though repetition ratified it. He found no need to question her feeling for him—he had divined it in a flash of inspiration as she stood waiting in the doorway of the gallery; but his own surrender was a different matter.

As the carriage passed round the corner of Whitehall and dipped into the traffic of Piccadilly he bent down again until her soft hair brushed his face; and the warm personal contact, the slight, fresh smell of violets so suggestive of her presence, stirred him afresh.

"Eve," he said, vehemently, "do you understand? Do you know that I have loved you always—from the

## THE MASQUERADER

very first?" As he said it he bent still nearer, kissing her lips, her forehead, her hair.

At the same moment the horses slackened speed and then stopped, arrested by one of the temporary blocks that so often occur in the traffic of Piccadilly Circus.

Loder, preoccupied with his own feelings, scarcely noticed the halt, but Eve drew away from him laughing.

"You mustn't!" she said, softly. "Look!"

The carriage had stopped beside one of the small islands that intersect the place; a group of pedestrians were crowded upon it, under the light of the electric lamp—wayfarers who, like themselves, were awaiting a passage. Loder took a cursory glance at them, then turned back to Eve.

"What are they, after all, but men and women?" he said. "They'd understand—every one of them." He laughed in his turn; nevertheless he withdrew his arm. Her feminine thought for conventionalities appealed to him. It was an acknowledgment of dependency.

For a while they sat silent, the light of the street lamp flickering through the glass of the window, the hum of voices and traffic coming to them in a continuous rise and fall of sound. At first the position was interesting; but, as the seconds followed each other, it gradually became irksome. Loder, watching the varying expressions of Eve's face, grew impatient of the delay, grew suddenly eager to be alone again in the fragrant darkness.

Impelled by the desire, he leaned forward and opened the window.

"Let's find the meaning of this," he said. "Is there nobody to regulate the traffic?" As he spoke he half rose and leaned out of the window. There was a touch

## THE MASQUERADER

of imperious annoyance in his manner. Fresh from the realization of power, there was something irksome in this commonplace check to his desires.

"Isn't it possible to get out of this?" Eve heard him call to the coachman. Then she heard no more.

He had leaned out of the carriage with the intention of looking onward towards the cause of the delay; instead, by that magnetic attraction that undoubtedly exists, he looked directly in front of him at the group of people waiting on the little island—at one man who leaned against the lamp-post in an attitude of apathy—a man with a pallid, unshaven face and lustreless eyes, who wore a cap drawn low over his forehead.

He looked at this man, and the man saw and returned his glance. For a space that seemed interminable they held each other's eyes; then very slowly Loder drew back into the carriage.

As he dropped into his seat, Eve glanced at him anxiously.

"John," she said, "has anything happened? You look ill."

He turned to her and tried to smile.

"It's nothing," he said. "Nothing to worry about." He spoke quickly, but his voice had suddenly become flat. All the command, all the domination had dropped away from it.

Eve bent close to him, her face lighting up with anxious tenderness. "It was the excitement," she said, "the strain of to-night."

He looked at her; but he made no attempt to press the fingers that clasped his own.

"Yes," he said, slowly. "Yes. It was the excitement of to-night—and the reaction."

## XXVI

THE next morning at eight o'clock, and again without breakfast, Loder covered the distance between Grosvenor Square and Clifford's Inn. He left Chilcote's house hastily—with a haste that only an urgent motive could have driven him to adopt. His steps were quick and uneven as he traversed the intervening streets; his shoulders lacked their decisive pose, and his pale face was marked with shadows beneath the eyes—shadows that bore witness to the sleepless night spent in pacing Chilcote's vast and lonely room. By the curious effect of circumstances the likeness between the two men had never been more significantly marked than on that morning of April 19th, when Loder walked along the pavements crowded with early workers and brisk with insistent news-venders already alive to the value of last night's political crisis.

The irony of this last element in the day's concerns came to him fully when one newsboy, more energetic than his fellows, thrust a paper in front of him.

"Sensation in the 'Ouse, sir! Speech by Mr. Chilcote! Government defeat!"

For a moment Loder stopped and his face reddened. The tide of emotions still ran strong. His hand went instinctively to his pocket; then his lips set. He shook his head and walked on.