

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.

THE MASQUERADER

With the same hard expression about his mouth, he turned into Clifford's Inn, passed through his own doorway, and mounted the stairs.

This time there was no milk-can on the threshold of his rooms and the door yielded to his pressure without the need of a key. With a strange sensation of reluctance he walked into the narrow passage and paused, uncertain which room to enter first. As he stood hesitating a voice from the sitting-room settled the question.

"Who's there?" it called, irritably. "What do you want?"

Without further ceremony the intruder pushed the door open and entered the room. As he did so he drew a quick breath—whether of disappointment or relief it was impossible to say. Whether he had hoped for or dreaded it, Chilcote was conscious.

As Loder entered he was sitting by the cheerless grate, the ashes of yesterday's fire showing charred and dreary where the sun touched them. His back was to the light, and about his shoulders was an old plaid rug. Behind him on the table stood a cup, a teapot, and the can of milk; farther off a kettle was set to boil upon a tiny spirit-stove.

In all strong situations we are more or less commonplace. Loder's first remark as he glanced round the disordered room seemed strangely inefficient.

"Where's Robins?" he asked, in a brusque voice. His mind teemed with big considerations, yet this was his first involuntary question.

Chilcote had started at the entrance of his visitor; now he sat staring at him, his hands holding the arms of his chair.

THE MASQUERADER

"Where's Robins?" Loder asked again.

"I don't know. She— I— We didn't hit it off. She's gone—went yesterday." He shivered and drew the rug about him.

"Chilcote—" Loder began, sternly; then he paused. There was something in the other's look and attitude that arrested him. A change of expression passed over his own face; he turned about with an abrupt gesture, pulled off his coat and threw it on a chair; then crossing deliberately to the fireplace, he began to rake the ashes from the grate.

Within a few minutes he had a fire crackling where the bed of dead cinders had been, and, having finished the task, he rose slowly from his knees, wiped his hands, and crossed to the table. On the small spirit-stove the kettle had boiled and the cover was lifting and falling with a tinkling sound. Blowing out the flame, Loder picked up the teapot, and with hands that were evidently accustomed to the task set about making the tea.

During the whole operation he never spoke, though all the while he was fully conscious of Chilcote's puzzled gaze. The tea ready, he poured it into the cup and carried it across the room.

"Drink this!" he said, laconically. "The fire will be up presently."

Chilcote extended a cold and shaky hand. "You see—" he began.

But Loder checked him almost savagely. "I do—as well as though I had followed you from Piccadilly last night! You've been hanging about, God knows where, till the small hours of the morning; then you've come back—slunk back, starving for your damned

THE MASQUERADER

poison and shivering with cold. You've settled the first part of the business, but the cold has still to be reckoned with. Drink the tea. I've something to say to you." He mastered his vehemence, and, walking to the window, stood looking down into the court. His eyes were blank, his face hard; his ears heard nothing but the faint sound of Chilcote's swallowing, the click of the cup against his teeth.

For a time that seemed interminable he stood motionless; then, when he judged the tea finished, he turned slowly. Chilcote had drawn closer to the fire. He was obviously braced by the warmth; and the apathy that hung about him was to some extent dispelled. Still moving slowly, Loder went towards him, and, relieving him of the empty cup, stood looking down at him.

"Chilcote," he said, very quietly, "I've come to tell you that the thing must end."

After he spoke there was a prolonged pause; then, as if shaken with sudden consciousness, Chilcote rose. The rug dropped from one shoulder and hung down ludicrously; his hand caught the back of the chair for support; his unshaven face looked absurd and repulsive in its sudden expression of scared inquiry. Loder involuntarily turned away.

"I mean it," he said, slowly. "It's over; we've come to the end."

"But why?" Chilcote articulated, blankly. "Why? Why?" In his confusion he could think of no better word.

"Because I throw it up. My side of the bargain's off!"

Again Chilcote's lips parted stammeringly. The

THE MASQUERADER

apathy caused by physical exhaustion and his recently administered drug was passing from him; the hopelessly shattered condition of mind and body was showing through it like a skeleton through a thin covering of flesh.

"But why?" he said again. "Why?"

Still Loder avoided the frightened surprise of his eyes. "Because I withdraw," he answered, doggedly.

Then suddenly Chilcote's tongue was loosened. "Loder," he cried, excitedly, "you can't do it! God! man, you can't do it!" To reassure himself he laughed—a painfully thin echo of his old, sarcastic laugh. "If it's a matter of greater opportunity—" he began, "of more money—"

But Loder turned upon him.

"Be quiet!" he said, so menacingly that the other stopped. Then by an effort he conquered himself. "It's not a matter of money, Chilcote," he said, quietly; "it's a matter of necessity." He brought the word out with difficulty.

Chilcote glanced up. "Necessity?" he repeated. "How? Why?"

The reiteration roused Loder. "Because there was a great scene in the House last night," he began, hurriedly; "because when you go back you'll find that Seaborough has smashed up over the assassination of Sir William Brice-Field at Meshed, and that you have made your mark in a big speech; and because—" Abruptly he stopped. The thing he had come to say—the thing he had meant to say—would not be said. Either his tongue or his resolution failed him, and for the instant he stood as silent and almost as ill at ease as his companion. Then all at once inspiration came

THE MASQUERADER

to him, in the suggestion of a wellnigh forgotten argument by which he might influence Chilcote and save his own self-respect. "It's all over, Chilcote," he said, more quietly; "it has run itself out." And in a dozen sentences he sketched the story of Lillian Astrupp—her past relations with himself, her present suspicions. It was not what he had meant to say; it was not what he had come to say; but it served the purpose—it saved him humiliation.

Chilcote listened to the last word; then, as the other finished, he dropped nervously back into his chair. "Good heavens! man," he said, "why didn't you tell me—why didn't you warn me, instead of filling my mind with your political position? Your political position!" He laughed unsteadily. The long spells of indulgence that had weakened his already maimed faculties showed in the laugh, in the sudden breaking of his voice. "You must do something, Loder!" he added, nervously, checking his amusement; "you must do something!"

Loder looked down at him. "No," he said, decisively. "It's your turn now. It's you who've got to do something."

Chilcote's face turned a shade grayer. "I can't," he said, below his breath.

"Can't? Oh yes, you can. We can all do—anything. It's not too late; there's just sufficient time. Chilcote," he added, suddenly, "don't you see that the thing has been madness all along—has been like playing with the most infernal explosives? You may thank whatever you have faith in that nobody has been smashed up! You are going back. Do you understand me? You are going back—now, to-day,

THE MASQUERADER

before it's too late." There was a great change in Loder; his strong, imperturbable face was stirred; he was moved in both voice and manner. Time after time he repeated his injunction—reasoning, expostulating, insisting. It almost seemed that he fought some strenuous invisible force rather than the shattered man before him.

Chilcote moved nervously in his seat. It was the first real clash of personalities. He felt it—recognized it by instinct. The sense of domination had fallen on him; he knew himself impotent in the other's hands. Whatever he might attempt in moments of solitude, he possessed no voice in presence of this invincible second self. For a while he struggled—he did not fight, he struggled to resist—then, lifting his eyes, he met Loder's. "And what will you do?" he said, weakly.

Loder returned his questioning gaze; but almost immediately he turned aside. "I?" he said. "Oh, I shall leave London."

XXVII

BUT Loder did not leave London. And the hour of two on the day following his dismissal of Chilcote found him again in his sitting-room.

He sat at the centre-table surrounded by a cloud of smoke; a pipe was between his lips and the morning's newspapers lay in a heap beside his elbow. To the student of humanity his attitude was intensely interesting. It was the attitude of a man trammelled by the knowledge of his strength. Before him, as he sat smoking, stretched a future of absolute nothingness; and towards this blank future one portion of his consciousness—a struggling and as yet scarcely sentient portion—pushed him inevitably; while another—a vigorous, persistent, human portion—cried to him to pause. So actual, so clamorous was this silent mental combat that had raged unceasingly since the moment of his renunciation that at last in physical response to it he pushed back his chair.

"It's too late!" he said, aloud. "I'm a fool. It's too late!"

Then abruptly, astonishingly, as though in direct response to his spoken thought, the door opened and Chilcote walked into the room.

Slowly Loder rose and stared at him. The feeling he acknowledged to himself was anger; but below the anger a very different sensation ran riotously strong.

THE MASQUERADER

And it was in time to this second feeling, this sudden, lawless joy, that his pulses beat as he turned a cold face on the intruder.

"Well?" he said, sternly.

But Chilcote was impervious to sternness. He was mentally shaken and distressed, though outwardly irreproachable, even to the violets in the lapel of his coat—the violets that for a week past had been brought each morning to the door of Loder's rooms by Eve's maid. For one second, as Loder's eyes rested on the flowers, a sting of ungovernable jealousy shot through him; then as suddenly it died away, superseded by another feeling—a feeling of new, spontaneous joy. Worn by Chilcote or by himself, the flowers were a symbol!

"Well?" he said again, in a gentler voice.

Chilcote had walked to the table and laid down his hat. His face was white and the muscles of his lips twitched nervously as he drew off his gloves.

"Thank Heaven, you're here!" he said, shortly. "Give me something to drink."

In silence Loder brought out the whiskey and set it on the table; then instinctively he turned aside. As plainly as though he saw the action, he mentally figured Chilcote's furtive glance, the furtive movement of his fingers to his waistcoat-pocket, the hasty dropping of the tabloids into the glass. For an instant the sense of his tacit connivance came to him sharply; the next, he flung it from him. The human, inner voice was whispering its old watchword. The strong man has no time to waste over his weaker brother!

When he heard Chilcote lay down his tumbler he

THE MASQUERADER

looked back again. "Well, what is it?" he said. "What have you come for?" He strove resolutely to keep his voice severe, but, try as he might, he could not quite subdue the eager force that lay behind his words. Once again, as on the night of their second interchange, life had become a phoenix, rising to fresh existence even while he sifted its ashes. "Well?" he said, once again.

Chilcote had set down his glass. He was nervously passing his handkerchief across his lips. There was something in the gesture that attracted Loder. Looking at him more attentively, he saw what his own feelings and the other's conventional dress had blinded him to—the almost piteous panic and excitement in his visitor's eyes.

"Something's gone wrong!" he said, with abrupt intuition.

Chilcote started. "Yes—no—that is, yes," he stammered.

Loder moved round the table. "Something's gone wrong," he repeated. "And you've come to tell me."

The tone unnerved Chilcote; he suddenly dropped into a chair. "It—it wasn't my fault," he began. "I—I have had a horrible time!"

Loder's lips tightened. "Yes," he said, "yes—I understand."

The other glanced up with a gleam of his old suspicion. "'Twas all my nerves, Loder—"

"Of course. Yes, of course." Loder's interruption was curt.

Chilcote eyed him doubtfully. Then recollection took the place of doubt, and a change passed over his expression. "It wasn't my fault," he began,

THE MASQUERADER

hastily. "On my soul, it wasn't! It was Crapham's beastly fault for showing her into the morning-room—"

Loder kept silent. His curiosity had flared into sudden life at the other's words, but he feared to break the shattered train of thought even by a word.

In the silence Chilcote moved uneasily. "You see," he went on, at last, "when I was here with you I—I felt strong. I—I—" He stopped.

"Yes, yes. When you were here with me you felt strong."

"Yes, that's it. While I was here, I felt I could do the thing. But when I went home—when I went up to my rooms—" Again he paused, passing his handkerchief across his forehead.

"When you went up to your rooms?" Loder strove hard to keep his control.

"To my room—? Oh, I—I forget about that. I forget about the night—" He hesitated confusedly. "All I remember is the coming down to breakfast next morning—this morning—at twelve o'clock—"

Loder turned to the table and poured himself out some whiskey. "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 down-stairs—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 whiskey slowly. His sense of overpowering curiosity held him very still; but he made no effort to prompt his companion.

THE MASQUERADER

Again Chilcote shifted his position agitatedly. "It had to be done," he said, disjointedly. "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 affright him.

"They tempted me," he repeated, hastily. "They seemed like magnets—they seemed to draw me towards 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

THE MASQUERADER

you, rather—about some beastly Wark 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 minutes in the study; then, as I came down-stairs, Crapham 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 Crapham 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?"

THE MASQUERADER

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.

"You see, 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 theatre party at the 'Arcadian' to-night, 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 Crapham 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

THE MASQUERADER

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 opening and shutting of doors, the hasty 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 house-tops; 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 waist-coats, 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."