

## THE MASQUERADER

He paused for a second in the shadowy door-way; then he turned unsteadily, drew the door to, and locked it.

Eve stepped forward. Her glimpse of him had been momentary—and she had not heard his voice—yet the consciousness of his bearing filled her with instinctive alarm. Abruptly, and without reason, her hands turned cold, her heart began to beat violently. “John—” she said below her breath.

For answer, he moved towards her. His face was bereft of color; there was a look of consternation in his eyes. “Come!” he said. “Come at once! I must take you home.” He spoke in a shaken, uneven voice.

Eve, looking up at him, caught his hand. “Why? Why?” she questioned. Her tone was low and scared.

Without replying, he drew her imperatively towards the stairs. “Go very softly,” he commanded. “No one must see you here.”

In the first moment she obeyed him instinctively; then, reaching the head of the stairs, she stopped. With one hand still clasping his, the other clinging nervously to the banister, she refused to descend. “John,” she whispered, “I’m not a child. What is it? What has happened? I must know.”

For a moment Loder looked at her uncertainly; then, reading the expression in her eyes, he yielded to her demand.

“He’s dead,” he said, in a very low voice. “Chilcote is dead.”

## XXXIV

TO fully appreciate a great announcement we must have time at our disposal. At the moment of Loder’s disclosure time was denied to Eve; for scarcely had the words left his lips before the thought that dominated him asserted its prior claim. Blind to the incredulity in her eyes, he drew her swiftly forward, and—half impelling, half supporting her—forced her to descend the stairs.

Never in after-life could he obliterate the remembrance of that descent. Fear, such as he could never experience in his own concerns, possessed him. One desire overrode all others—the desire that Eve’s reputation, which he himself had so nearly imperilled, should remain unimperilled. In the shadow of that urgent duty, the despair of the past hours, the appalling fact so lately realized, the future with its possible trials, became dark to his imagination. In his new victory over self, the question of her protection predominated.

Moving under this compulsion, he guided her hastily and silently down the deserted stairs, drawing a breath of deep relief as, one after another, the landings were successively passed; and still actuated by the suppressed need of haste, he passed through the door-way that they had entered under such different conditions only a few minutes before.

To leave the quiet court, to gain the Strand, to hail

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a belated hansom was the work of a moment. By an odd contrivance of circumstance, the luck that had attended every phase of his dual life was again exerted in his behalf. No one had noticed their entry into Clifford's Inn; no one was moved to curiosity by their exit. With an involuntary thrill of feeling he gave expression to his relief.

"Thank God, it's over!" he said, as a cab drew up. "You don't know what the strain has been."

Moving as if in a dream, Eve stepped into the cab. As yet the terrible dénouement to their enterprise had made no clear impression upon her mind. For the moment all that she was conscious of, all that she instinctively acknowledged, was the fact that Loder was still beside her.

In quiet obedience she took her place, drawing aside her skirts to make room for him; and in the same subdued manner he stepped into the vehicle. Then, with the strange sensation of re-living their earlier drive, they were aware of the tightened rein and of the horse's first forward movement.

For several seconds neither spoke. Eve, shutting out all other thoughts, sat close to Loder, clinging tenaciously to the momentary comforting sense of protection; Loder, striving to marshal his ideas, hesitated before the ordeal of speech. At last, realizing his responsibility, he turned to her slowly.

"Eve," he said, in a low voice and with some hesitation, "I want you to know that in all this—from the moment I saw him—from the moment I understood—I have had you in my thoughts—you and no one else."

She raised her eyes to his face.

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"Do you realize—?" he began afresh. "Do you know what this—this thing means?"

Still she remained silent.

"It means that after to-night there will be no such person in London as John Loder. To-morrow the man who was known by that name will be found in his rooms; his body will be removed, and at the post-mortem examination it will be stated that he died of an overdose of morphia. His charwoman will identify him as a solitary man who lived respectably for years and then suddenly went down-hill with remarkable speed. It will be quite a common case. Nothing of interest will be found in his rooms; no relation will claim his body; after the usual time he will be given the usual burial of his class. These details are horrible; but there are times when we must look at the horrible side of life—because life is incomplete without it.

"These things I speak of are the things that will meet the casual eye; but in our sight they will have a very different meaning.

"Eve," he said, more vehemently, "a whole chapter in my life has been closed to-night, and my first instinct is to shut the book and throw it away. But I'm thinking of you. Remember, I'm thinking of you! Whatever the trial, whatever the difficulty, no harm shall come to you. You have my word for that!

"I'll return with you now to Grosvenor Square; I'll remain there till a reasonable excuse can be given for Chilcote's going abroad; I will avoid Fraide, I will cut politics—whatever the cost; then, at the first reasonable moment, I will do what I would do now, to-night if it

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were possible. I'll go away, start afresh; do in another country what I have done in this."

There was a long silence; then Eve turned to him. The apathy of a moment before had left her face. "In another country?" she repeated. "In another country?"

"Yes; a fresh career in a fresh country. Something clean to offer you. I'm not too old to do what other men have done."

He paused, and for a moment Eve looked ahead at the gleaming chain of lamps; then, still very slowly, she brought her glance back again. "No," she said very slowly. "You are not too old. But there are times when age—and things like age—are not the real consideration. It seems to me that your own inclination, your own individual sense of right and wrong, has nothing to do with the present moment. The question is whether you are *justified* in going away"—she paused, her eyes fixed steadily upon his—"whether you are free to go away, and make a new life—whether it is ever justifiable to follow a phantom light when—when there's a lantern waiting to be carried." Her breath caught; she drew away from him, frightened and elated by her own words.

Loder turned to her sharply. "Eve!" he exclaimed; then his tone changed. "You don't know what you're saying," he added, quickly; "you don't understand what you're saying."

Eve leaned forward again. "Yes," she said, slowly, "I do understand." Her voice was controlled, her manner convinced. She was no longer the girl conquered by strength greater than her own; she was the

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woman strenuously demanding her right to individual happiness.

"I understand it all," she repeated. "I understand every point. It was not Chance that made you change your identity, that made you care for me, that brought about—his death. I don't believe it was Chance; I believe it was something much higher. You are not meant to go away!"

As Loder watched her the remembrance of his first days as Chilcote rose again; the remembrance of how he had been dimly filled with the belief that below her self-possession lay a strength—a depth—uncommon in woman. As he studied her now, the instinctive belief flamed into conviction. "Eve!" he said involuntarily.

With a quick gesture she raised her head. "No!" she exclaimed. "No; don't say anything! You are going to see things as I see them—you must do so—you have no choice. No real man ever casts away the substance for the shadow!" Her eyes shone—the color, the glow, the vitality, rushed back into her face.

"John," she said, softly, "I love you—and I need you—but there is something with a greater claim—a greater need than mine. Don't you know what it is?"

He said nothing; he made no gesture.

"It is the party—the country. You may put love aside, but duty is different. You have pledged yourself. You are not meant to draw back."

Loder's lips parted.

"Don't!" she said again. "Don't say anything! I know all that is in your mind. But, when we sift things right through, it isn't my love—or our happiness—that's really in the balance. It is your future!"

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Her voice thrilled. "You are going to be a great man; and a great man is the property of his country. He has no right to individual action."

Again Loder made an effort to speak, but again she checked him.

"Wait!" she exclaimed. "Wait! You believe you have acted wrongly, and you are desperately afraid of acting wrongly again. But is it really truer, more loyal for us to work out a long probation in grooves that are already overfilled than to marry quietly abroad and fill the places that have need of us? That is the question I want you to answer. Is it really truer and nobler? Oh, I see the doubt that is in your mind! You think it finer to go away and make a new life than to live the life that is waiting you—because one is independent and the other means the use of another man's name and another man's money—that is the thought in your mind. But what is it that prompts that thought?" Again her voice caught, but her eyes did not falter. "I will tell you. It is not self-sacrifice—but pride!" She said the word fearlessly.

A flush crossed Loder's face. "A man requires pride," he said in a low voice.

"Yes, at the right time. But is this the right time? Is it ever right to throw away the substance for the shadow? You say that I don't understand—don't realize. I realize more to-night than I have realized in all my life. I know that you have an opportunity that can never come again—and that it's terribly possible to let it slip—"

She paused. Loder, his hands resting on the closed doors of the cab, sat very silent, with averted eyes and bent head.

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"Only to-night," she went on, "you told me that everything was crying to you to take the easy, pleasant way. Then it was strong to turn aside; but now it is not strong. It is far nobler to fill an empty niche than to carve one for yourself. John—" She suddenly leaned forward, laying her hands over his. "Mr. Fraide told me to-night that in his new ministry my—my husband was to be Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs!"

The words fell softly. So softly that to ears less comprehending than Loder's their significance might have been lost—as his rigid attitude and unresponsive manner might have conveyed lack of understanding to any eyes less observant than Eve's.

For a long space there was no word spoken. At last, with a very gentle pressure, her fingers tightened over his hands.

"John—" she began, gently. But the word died away. She drew back into her seat, as the cab stopped before Chilcote's house.

Simultaneously as they descended, the hall door was opened and a flood of warm light poured out reassuringly into the darkness.

"I thought it was your cab, sir," Crapham explained deferentially as they passed into the hall. "Mr. Fraide has been waiting to see you this half-hour. I showed him into the study." He closed the door softly and retired.

Then, in the warm light, amid the gravely dignified surroundings that had marked his first entry into this hazardous second existence, Eve turned to Loder for the verdict upon which the future hung.

As she turned, his face was still hidden from her, and his attitude betrayed nothing.

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"John," she said, slowly, "you know why he is here. You know that he has come to personally offer you this place; to personally receive your refusal—or consent."

She ceased to speak; there was a moment of suspense; then Loder turned. His face was still pale and grave with the gravity of a man who has but recently been close to death, but beneath the gravity was another look—the old expression of strength and self-reliance, tempered, raised, and dignified by a new humility.

Moving forward, he held out his hands.

"My consent or refusal," he said, very quietly, "lies with—my wife."

THE END



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