

THE Masquerader

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CHAPTER VII.

IT was a little less than three weeks since Chilcote and Loder had drunk their toast and again Loder was seated at his desk.

His head was bent and his hand moved carefully as he traced line after line of meaningless words on a sheet of foolscap. Having covered the page with writing, he rose, moved to the center table and compared his task with an open letter that lay there. The comparison seemed to please him. He straightened his shoulders and threw back his head in an attitude of critical satisfaction. So absorbed was he that when a step sounded on the stairs outside he did not notice it, and only raised his head when the door was thrown open unceremoniously. Even then his interest was momentary.

"Hello!" he said, his eyes returning to their scrutiny of his task.

Chilcote shut the door and came hastily across the room. He looked ill and harassed. As he reached Loder he put out his hand nervously and touched his arm.

Loder looked up. "What is it?" he asked. "Any new development?"

Chilcote tried to smile. "Yes," he said huskily. "It's come."

Loder freed his arm. "What? The end of the world?"

"No. The end of me." The words came jerkily, the strain that had enforced them showing in every syllable.

Still Loder was uncomprehending. He could not or would not understand.

Again Chilcote caught and jerked at his sleeve. "Don't you see? Can't you see?"

"No."

Chilcote dropped the sleeve and passed his handkerchief across his forehead. "It's come," he repeated. "Don't you understand? I want you." He drew away, then stepped back again anxiously. "I know I'm taking you unaware," he said. "But it's not my fault. On my soul, it's not! The thing seems to spring at me and grip me." He stopped, sinking weakly into a chair.

For a moment Loder stood erect and immovable. Then, almost with reluctance, his glance turned to the figure beside him.

"You want me to take your place tonight, without preparation?" His voice was distinct and firm, but it was free from contempt.

"Yes; yes, I do." Chilcote spoke without looking up.

"That you may spend the night in morphia—and this other night?"

Chilcote lifted a flushed, unsettled face. "You have no right to preach. You accepted the bargain."

Loder raised his head quickly. "I never," he began. Then both his face and voice altered. "You are quite right," he said coldly. "You won't have to complain again."

Chilcote stirred uncomfortably. "My dear chap," he said, "I meant no offense. It's merely—

"Your nerves, I know. But come to business. What am I to do?"

Chilcote rose excitedly. "Yes, business. Let's come to business. It's rough on you, taking you short like this. But you have an erratic person to deal with. I've had a horrible day—a horrible day." His face had paled again, and in the green lamplight it possessed a grayish hue. Involuntarily Loder turned away.

Chilcote watched him as he passed to the desk and began mechanically sorting papers. "A horrible day," he repeated. "So bad that I dare't face the night. You have read *De Quincey*?" he asked, with a sudden change of tone.

"Yes."

"Then read him again and you'll understand. I have all the horrors without any art. I have no ladies of sorrow, but I have worse monsters than his 'crocodile'." He laughed unpleasantly.

Loder turned. "Why, in the devil's name—" he began; then again he halted. Something in Chilcote's drawn, excited face checked him. The strange sense of predestination that we sometimes see in the eyes of another struck cold upon him, chilling his last attempt at remonstrance. "What do you want to do?" he substituted in an ordinary voice.

The words steadied Chilcote. He laughed a little. The laugh was still shaky, but it was pitched in a lower key.

"You—you're quite right to pull me up. We have no time to waste. It must be 1 o'clock." He pulled out his watch, then walked to the window and stood looking down into the shadowy court. "How quiet you are here!" he said. "Then abruptly a new thought struck him, and he wheeled back into the room. "Loder," he said quickly. "Loder, I have an idea! While you are me, why shouldn't I be you? Why shouldn't I be John Loder instead of the vagrant we contemplated? It covers everything; it explains everything. It's magnificent! I'm amazed we never thought of it before."

Loder was then beside the desk. "I thought of it," he said without looking back.

"And didn't suggest it?"

"No."

"Why?"

Loder said nothing, and the other sardonically.

"Jealous of your reputation?" he said sardonically.

"I have none to be jealous of."

Chilcote laughed disagreeably. "Then you aren't so far gone in philosophy as I thought. You have a niche in your own good opinion."

Again Loder was silent; then he smiled. "You have an oddly correct perception at times," he said. "I suppose I have had a lame sort of pride in keeping my name clean, but pride like that is out of fashion, and I've got to float with the tide." He laughed a short laugh that Chilcote had heard once or twice before, and, crossing the room, he stood beside his vis-

itor. "After all," he said, "what business have I with pride, straight or lame? Have my identity, if you want it. When all defenses have been broken down one barrier won't save the town!" Laughing again, he laid his hand on the other's arm. "Come," he said, "give your orders. I capitulate."

An hour later the two men passed from Loder's bedroom, where the final arrangements had been completed, back into the sitting room. Loder came first in faultless evening dress. His hair was carefully brushed, the clothes he wore fitted him perfectly. To any glance, critical or casual, he was the man who had mounted the stairs and entered the rooms earlier in the evening. Chilcote's manner of walking and poise of the head seemed to have descended upon him with Chilcote's clothes. He came into the room hastily and passed to the desk.

"I have no private papers," he said, "so I have nothing to lock up. Everything can stand as it is. A woman named Robins comes in the mornings to clean up and light the fire; otherwise you must shift for yourself. Nobody will disturb you. Quiet, dead quiet, is about the one thing you can count on."

Chilcote, half halting in the doorway, made an attempt to laugh. Of the two he was noticeably the more embarrassed. In Loder's well worn, well brushed tweed suit he felt stranded on his own personality, broken for the moment of the familiar accessories that helped to cloak deficiencies and keep the wheel of conventionality comfortably rolling. He stood unpleasantly conscious of himself, unable to shape his sensations even in thought. He glanced at the fire, at the table, finally at the chair on which he had thrown his overcoat before entering the bedroom. At the sight of the coat his gaze brightened, the aimlessness forsaking him, and he gave an exclamation of relief.

"And women don't count ever after?" Chilcote smiled, beguiled out of himself.

Loder laughed. "That's what I've been trying to convey. Once bitten, twice shy!" He laughed again and slipped the two rings over his finger with an air of finality.

"Now, shall I start? This is the latchkey." He drew a key from the pocket of Chilcote's evening clothes. "When I get to Grosvenor square I am to find your house, go straight in, mount the stairs and there on my right hand will be the door of your—I mean my own private rooms. I think I've got it by heart. I feel inspired. I feel that I can't go wrong." He turned to the remaining rings and picked one.

"I'll stick on till I get a wire," he said. "Then I'll come back and we'll reverse again." He slipped on the coat and moved back toward the table. Now that the decisive moment had come it embarrassed him. Scarcey howing how to bring it to an end, he held out his hand.

Chilcote took it, paling a little. "Twill be all right," he said, with a sudden return of nervousness. "Twill be all right! And I've made it plain about—about the remuneration: a hundred a week, besides all expenses."

Loder smiled again. "My pay? Oh, yes, you've made it clear as day. Shall we say good night now?"

"Yes. Good night."

There was a strange, distant note in Chilcote's voice, but the other did not pretend to hear it. He pressed the hand he was holding, though the cold dampness of it repelled him.

The other smiled. "It's a memento." Loder touched the rings. "You have good taste," he said. "Let's see if they serve their purpose." He picked them up and carried them to the lamp.

Chilcote followed him. "That was an ugly wound," he said, his curiosity reawakening as Loder extended his finger. "How did you come by it?"

The other smiled. "It's a memento," he said.

"Of bravery?"

They stood for a moment awkwardly looking at each other, then Loder quietly disengaged his hand, crossed the room and passed through the door.

Chilcote, left standing alone in the middle of the room, listened while the last sound of the other's footsteps was audible on the uncarpeted stairs. Then, with a furtive, hurried gesture, he caught up the green shaded lamp and passed into Loder's bedroom.

CHAPTER VIII.

To all men come portentous moments, difficult moments, triumphant moments. Loder had had his examples of all three, but no moment in his career ever equalled in strangeness of sensation that in which, dressed in another man's clothes, he fitted the latchkey for the first time into the door of the other man's house.

The act was quietly done. The key fitted the lock smoothly, and his fingers turned it without hesitation, though his heart, usually extremely steady, beat sharply for a second. The hall loomed massive and somber, despite the modernity of electric lights. It was darkly and expensively decorated in black and brown; a frieze of wrought bronze, representing peacock with outspread tails, ornamented the walls; the banisters were of heavy ironwork, and the somewhat formidable fireplace was of the same dark metal.

Loder looked about him, then advanced, his heart again beating quickly as his hand touched the cold banister and he began his ascent of the stairs. But at each step his confidence strengthened, his feet became more firm until, at the head of the stairs, as if to disprove his assurance, his pulses played him false once more, this time to a more serious tune. From the farther end of a well lighted corridor a maid was coming straight in his direction.

Loder went on without heeding. "This thing happened eight years ago at Santasalare," he said, "a little place between Luna and Pistoria—a mere handful of houses wedged between two hills; a regular relic of old Italy crumpling away under flowers and sunshine, with nothing to suggest the present century except the occasional passing of a train round the base of one of the hills. I had literally stumbled upon the place on a long tramp south from Switzerland and had been tempted to a stay at the little inn. The night after my arrival something unusual occurred. There was an accident to the train at the point where it skirted the village."

There was a small excitement. All the inhabitants were anxious to help, and I took my share. As a matter of fact, the smash was not disastrous; the passengers were hurt and frightened, but nobody was killed."

He paused and looked at his companion; but, seeing him interested, went on.

"Among these passengers was an English lady. Of all concerned in the business, she was the least upset. When I came upon her she was sitting on the shattered door of one of the carriages calmly arranging her hat. Seeing me she looked up with the most charming smile imaginable."

"I have just been waiting for somebody like you," she said. "My stupid maid has got herself smashed up somewhere in the second class carriage, and I have nobody to help me find my way."

"Of course, that first speech ought to have enlightened me, but it didn't. I only saw the smile and heard the voice. I knew nothing of whether they were deep or shallow. So I found the maid and found the dog. The first expressed gratitude, the other didn't. I extricated him with enormous difficulty from the wreck of the luggage van, and this

was how he marked his appreciation." He held out his hand and nodded toward the scar. Chilcote glanced up. "So that's the explanation?"

"Yes. I tried to conceal the thing when I restored the dog, but I was bleeding abominably and I failed. Then the whole business was changed. It was I who needed seeing to, my new friend insisted; I who should be looked after and not she. She forgot the dog in the newer interest of my wounded finger. The maid, who was practically unharmed, was sent on to engage rooms at the little inn, and she and I followed slowly."

"That walk impressed me. There was an attractive mistiness of atmosphere in the warm night, a sensation more than attractive in being made much of by a woman of one's own class and country after five years' wandering."

He laughed with a touch of irony.

"But I won't take up your time with details. You know the progress of an ordinary love affair. Throw in a few more flowers and a little more sunshine than is usual, a man who is practically a hermit and a woman who knows the world by heart and you have the whole thing."

"She insisted on staying in Santasalare for three days in order to keep my finger bandaged. She ended by staying three weeks in the hope of smashing up my life."

"On coming to the hotel she had given no name, and in our first explanations to each other she led me to conclude her an unmarried girl. It was at the end of the three weeks that I learned that she was not a free agent, as I had innocently imagined, but possessed a husband whom she had left ill at Florence or Rome."

"I have no private papers," he said, "so I have nothing to lock up. Everything can stand as it is. A woman named Robins comes in the mornings to clean up and light the fire; otherwise you must shift for yourself. Nobody will disturb you. Quiet, dead quiet, is about the one thing you can count on."

"She insisted on staying without surprise or interest. "Yes, sir?" she said.

"Is your mistress in?" he asked. He could think of no other question, but it served his purpose as a test of his voice.

"Still the woman showed no surprise. "She's not in, sir," she answered. "But she's expected in half an hour."

"In half an hour? All right. That's all I wanted." With a movement of decision Loder walked back to the stair head, turned to the right and opened the door of Chilcote's rooms.

The door opened on a short, wide passage. On one side stood the study, on the other the bed, bath and dressing rooms. With a blind sense of knowledge and unfamiliarity, bid of much description on Chilcote's part, he put his hand on the study door and, still exalted by the omen of his first success, turned the handle.

Inside the room there was firelight and lamplight and a studious air of peace. The realization of this and a slow incredulity at Chilcote's voluntary renunciation were his first impressions. "Eve's" attention was needed for more imminent things.

As he entered the new secretary was returning a volume to its place on the book shelves. At sight of him Loder pushed it hastily into position and turned the door.

"I was making a few notes on the political position of Khorasan," he said, glancing with slight apprehensiveness at the other's face. He was a small, shy man, with few social attainments, but an extraordinary amount of learning—the antithesis of the alert Blessington, whom he had replaced.

Loder bore his scrutiny without flinching. Indeed, it struck him suddenly that there was fund of interest, almost of excitement, in the encountering of each new pair of eyes. At the thought he moved forward to her again.

She had taken off her cloak and was standing by the fire. The compulsion of moving through life alone had set its seal upon her in a certain self-possession, a certain confidence of pose, yet her figure as Loder then saw it, backgrounded by the dark books and gown in pale blue, had a suggestion of youthfulness that seemed a contradiction. The remembrance of Chilcote's epithets "cold" and "unsympathetic" came back to him with something like astonishment. He felt no uneasiness, no dread of discovery and humiliation in her presence as he had felt in the maid's, yet there was something in her face that made him infinitely more uncomfortable, a look he could find no name for; a friendliness that studiously covered another feeling, whether question, distrust or actual dislike he could not say. With a strange sensation of awkwardness he sorted Chilcote's letters, waiting for her to speak.

As if divining his thought she turned toward him. "I'm afraid I rather intrude," she said. "If you are busy—

His sense of courtesy was touched. He had begun life with a high opinion of women, and the words shook up an echo of the old sentiment.

Loder was taking off his coat, but stopped in the operation.

"This morning?" he said. "Oh, did I? Did I?" Then struck by the opportunity the words gave him he turned toward the secretary. "You've got to get used to me, Greening," he said. "You haven't quite grasped me yet, I can see. I'm a man of moods, you know. Up to the present you've seen my slack side, my jarred side, but I have quite another when I care to show it. I'm a sort of Jekyll and Hyde affair." Again he laughed, and Greening echoed the sound diffidently. Chilcote had evidently discouraged familiarity.

Loder eyed him with abrupt understanding. He recognized the loneliness in the anxious, conciliatory manner.

"You're tired," he said kindly. "Go to bed. I've got some thinking to do. Good night." He held out his hand.

Greening took it, still half distrustful of this fresh side to so complex a man.

"Good night, sir," he said. "Tomorrow, if you approve, I shall go on with my notes. I hope you will have a restful night."

For a second Loder's eyebrows went up, but he recovered himself instantly. "Ah, thanks, Greening," he said.

"Thanks. I think your hope will be fulfilled."

He watched the little secretary move softly and apologetically to the door, then he walked to the fire and, resting his elbows on the mantelpiece, he took his face in his hands.

For a space he stood absolutely quiet, then his hands dropped to his sides, and he turned slowly round. In that short space he had balanced things and found his bearings. The slight nervousness shown in his brusque sentences and overconfident manner faded out, and he faced facts steadily.

With the return of his calmness he took a long survey of the room. His glance brightened appreciatively as it traveled from the walls lined with well bound books to the lamps modulated to the proper light; from the lamps to the desk fitted with every requirement. Nothing was lacking. All he had once possessed, all he had since dreamed of, was here, but on a greater scale. To enjoy the luxuries of life a man must go long without them. Loder had lived severely—so severely that until three weeks ago he had believed himself exempt from the tempt