

THE Masquerader

By KATHERINE CECIL THURSTON,
Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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Eve, looking back, saw the expression on his face. He held her, like a sudden glimpse into a secret room. In all the years of her marriage, in the months of her courtship even, she had never surprised the look on Chilcote's face. The impression came quickly and with it a strange, warm rush of interest that needed slowly, leaving an odd sense of loneliness. But, at the moment that the feeling came and passed, her attention was claimed in another direction. A slight, fair haired boy forced his way toward her through the press of people that filled the corridor.

"Mrs. Chilcote," he exclaimed. "Can I believe my luck in finding you alone?" Eve laughed. It seemed that there was relief in her laugh. "How absurd you are, Bobby," she said kindly. "But you are wrong. My husband is here. I am waiting for him."

Blessington looked around. "Oh!" he said. "Indeed!" Then he relaxed into silence. He was the son of good nature, but those who knew him best knew that Chilcote's summary change of secretaries had rankled. Eve, conscious of the little jar, made haste to smooth it away.

"Tell me about yourself," she said. "What have you been doing?" Blessington looked at her, then smiled again, his buoyancy restored. "Doing?" he said. "Oh, calling every other afternoon at Grosvenor square, only to find that a certain lady is never at home."

At his tone Eve laughed again. The boy, with his frank and ingenious nature, had beguiled many a dull hour for her in past days, and she had missed him not a little when his face had been filled by Greening.

"But I mean seriously, Bobby. Has something good turned up?"

Blessington made a wry face. "Something is on its way. That's why I'm on duty tonight. Old Bramfell and the pater are working it between them, so if Lady Bramfell or Lady Astrupp happen to drop a fan or a handkerchief this evening I've got to be here to pick it up. See?"

"As you picked up my fans and handkerchiefs last year and the year before?" Eve smiled. Blessington's face suddenly looked grave. "I wish you hadn't said that," he said. Then he paused abruptly. Out of the hum of talk behind them a man's laugh came to her. It was not loud, but it was a laugh that one seldom hears in a London drawing room. It expressed interest, amusement and in an inexplicable way it seemed also to express strength.

Eve and Blessington both turned involuntarily.

"By Jove!" said Blessington.

Eve said nothing.

Loder was laughing with Lakeley and his was the laugh that had attracted them both. The interest excited by his talk was still reflected in his face and bearing as he made his way toward them.

"By Jove!" said Blessington again. "I never realized that Chilcote was so tall."

Again Eve said nothing. But silently and with a more subtle meaning she found herself echoing the words. "Until he was quite close to her Loder did not seem to see her. Then he stopped quickly."

"I was speaking to Lakeley," he said.

"He wants me to dine with him one night at Cadogan Gardens."

But Eve was silent, waiting for him to address Blessington. She glanced at him quickly, but though their eyes met he did not catch the meaning that lay in hers. It was a difficult moment. She had known him incredibly almost unparadically absentminded, but it had invariably been when he was suffering from nerves, as she phrased it to herself. But tonight he was obviously in the possession of unclouded faculties. She colored slightly and glanced under her lashes at Blessington.

Had the same idea struck him, she wondered? But he was studiously studying a suit of Chinese armor that stood close by in a niche of the wall.

"Bobby has been keeping me amused while you talked to Mr. Lakeley," she said pointedly.

Directly addressed, Loder turned and looked at Blessington. "How do you do?" he said, with doubtful cordiality. The name of Bobby conveyed nothing to him.

To his surprise Eve looked annoyed and Blessington's fresh colored face deepened in tone. With a slow, uncomfortable sensation he was aware of having struck a wrong note.

There was a short, unpleasant pause. Then, more by intuition than actual sight, Blessington saw Eve's eyes turn from him to Loder, and with quick tact he saved the situation.

"How do you do, sir?" he responded, with a smile. "I congratulate you on looking so—so uncommon well. I was just telling Mrs. Chilcote that I hold a commission for Lady Astrupp to-night. I'm a sort of scout at present—reporting on the outposts." He spoke fast and without much meaning, but his boyish voice eased the strain.

Eve thanked him with a smile.

"Then we mustn't interfere with a person on active service," she said.

"Besides, we have our own duties to get through." She smiled again and, touching Loder's arm, indicated the reception rooms.

When they entered the larger of the two rooms Lady Bramfell was still receiving her guests. She was a tall and angular woman who, except for a certain beauty of hands and feet and a certain similarity of voice, possessed nothing in common with her sister Lillian. She was speaking to a group of people as they approached, and the first sound of her sweet and rather drawing tones touched Loder with a curious momentary feeling—a vague suggestion of awakened memories. Then the suggestion vanished as she turned and greeted Eve.

"How sweet of you to come!" she murmured. And it seemed to Loder that a more spontaneous smile lighted up her face. Then she extended her hand to him. "And you, too?" she added. "Though I fear we shall bore you dreadfully."

Watching her with interest, he saw the change of expression as her eyes turned from Eve to him and noticed a colder tone in her voice as she addressed him directly. The observation moved him to self assertion.

"That's a poor compliment to me," he said. "To be bored is surely only a polite way of being inane."

Lady Bramfell smiled. "What!" she exclaimed. "You defending your social reputation?"

Loder laughed a little. "The smaller it is the more defending it needs," he replied.

Another stream of arrivals swept by them as he spoke. Eve smiled at their hostess and moved across the room, and he followed. As he gained her side the little court about Lady Bramfell was left well in the rear, the great throng at the further end of the room was not yet reached, and for the moment they were practically alone.

There was a certain uneasiness in that moment of companionship. It seemed to him that Eve wished to speak, but hesitated. Once or twice she opened and closed the fan that she was carrying, then at last, as if by an effort, she turned and looked at him.

"Why were you so cold to Bobby Blessington?" she asked. "Doesn't it seem discourteous to ignore him as you did?"

Her manner was subdued. It was not the annoyed manner that one uses to a man when he has behaved ill; it was the manner of a woman who has been filled by Greening.

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Eve looked round from the lively group by which she was surrounded. "Lillian's crystal gazing? Why, of course," she said. "She should make a very beautiful seer. We are all quite curious."

Bramfell pursed up his lips. "She has a very beautiful 'tent' at the end of the conservatory. It took five men as many days to rig it up. We could not hear ourselves talk for hammering. My wife said it made her feel quite philanthropic, it reminded her so much of a charity bazaar."

Everybody laughed, and at the same moment Blessington came quickly across the room and joined the group. "Hello!" he said. "Anybody seen Witcheaston? He's next on my list for the crystal business."

Against the whole party laughed, and Bramfell, stepping forward, touched Blessington's arm in mock seriousness. "Witcheaston is playing bridge, like a sensible man," he said. "Leave him in peace, Bobby."

Blessington made a comical grimace. "But I'm working this on commercial principles," he said. "I keep the list, names and houses complete. And Lady Astrupp gazes in blissful ignorance as to who her victims are. The whole thing is great, simple and statistical."

"For goodness' sake, Bobby, shut up!" Bramfell's round eyes were twinkling with amusement.

"But my system?"

"Systems! Ah, we all had them when we were as young as you are!"

"And they all had flaws, Bobby."

"We were always finding out about Lord Witcheaston. Get a substitute. It won't count if Lillian doesn't know."

Blessington waved as she spoke. His eyes wandered round the party and again rested on Bramfell.

"Not me, Bobby! Remember, I've breathed crystals—practically lived on them—for the last week. Now, there's Chilcote!"

All eyes were turned on Loder, though one or two strayed surreptitiously to Eve. She, sensing sensitivity to the position, laughed quickly.

"A very good idea!" she said. "Who wants to see the future if not a politician?"

Loder glanced from her to Blessington. Then, with a very feminine impulse, she settled the matter beyond dispute.

"Please use your authority, Bobby," she said. "And when you've got him safely under canvas come back to me. It's years since we've had a talk."

She nodded and smiled, then instantly turned to Bramfell with some trivial remark.

For a second Loder waited; then, with a movement of resignation, he laid his hand on Blessington's arm.

"Very well," he said. "But if my fate is black, witness it was my wife who sent me to it." His faint pause on the word wife, the mention of the word itself in the presence of these people, had a savor of recklessness. The small discomfiture of his earlier slip vanished before it. He experienced a strong reaction of confidence in his luck.

With a cool head, a steady step and a friendly pressure of the fingers on Blessington's arm, he allowed himself to be drawn across the reception rooms, through the long corridors and down the broad flight of steps that led to the conservatory.

The conservatory was a feature of the Bramfell town house, and to Loder it came as something wonderful and unlooked for, with its clustering green branches, its slight, unoppressive scents, its temperately pleasant atmosphere. He felt no wish to speak as, still guided by Blessington, he passed down the shadowy paths that in the half light had the warmth and mystery of a southern garden. Here and there from the darkness came the whispering of a voice or the sound of a laugh, bringing with it the necessary touch of life. Otherwise the place was still.

Absorbed by the air of solitude, contrasting so remarkably with the noise and crowded glitter left behind in the reception rooms, he had moved half-way down the long green aisle before the business in hand came back to him with a sudden sense of annoyance.

It seemed so paltry to mar the quiet of the place with the absurdity of a side show. He turned to Blessington with a touch of abruptness.

"What am I expected to do?" he asked.

Blessington looked up, surprised. "Why, I thought, sir," he began; then he instantly altered his tone. "Oh, just enter into the spirit of the thing. Lady Astrupp won't put much strain on your credulity, but she'll make a big call on your solemnity." He laughed.

He had an infectious laugh, and Loder responded to it.

"But what am I to do?" he persisted.

"Oh, nothing. Being the priestess, she naturally demands acolytes, but she'll let you know that she holds the prior place. The tent is so fixed that she sees nothing beyond your hands, so there's absolutely no deception." He laughed once more. Then suddenly he lowered his voice and slackened his steps. "Here we are," he whispered in pretended awe.

At the end of the path the space widened to the full breadth of the conservatory. The light was dimmer, giving an added impression of distance; away to the left Loder heard the sound of splashing water, and on his right hand he caught his first glimpse of the tent that was his goal.

It was an artistic little structure—a pavilion formed of silky fabric that showed bronze in the light of an oriental lamp that hung above the entrance. As they drew closer a man emerged from it. He stood for a moment in uncertainty, looking about him; then, catching sight of them, he came forward, laughing.

"By George," he exclaimed, "it's as dark as limbo in there! I didn't see you at first. But I say, Blessington, it's a beastly shame to have that thunderclap barrier shutting off the sorcerer. If she gazes at the crystal, mayn't we have something to gaze at too?"

Blessington laughed. "You want too much, Galtrey," he said. "Lady Astrupp understands the value of the unattainable. Come along, sir!" he added to Loder, drawing him forward with an energetic pressure of the arm.

Loder responded, and as he did so a flicker of curiosity touched his mind for the first time. He wondered for

an instant who this woman was who aroused so much comment. And with the speculation came the remembrance of how she had assured Chilcote that on one point at least he was invulnerable. He had spoken then from the height of a past experience—an experience so fully passed that he wondered now if it had been as staple a guarantee as he had then believed. Man's capacity for outliving is astonishingly complete. The long ago incident in the Italian mountains had faded, like a crayon study in gradually lost character, merged and faded before the present. The past had paled before the present. The smile came with apparent irrelevance. Then again Blessington pressed his arm.

"Now, sir," he said, drawing away and lifting the curtain that hung before the entrance of the tent.

Loder looked at the amused, boyish face lighted by the hanging lamp, and smiled lightly; then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he entered the pavilion, and the curtain fell behind him.

CHAPTER XV.

ON entering the pavilion Loder's first feeling was one of annoyed awkwardness at finding himself in almost total darkness. But as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom the feeling vanished and the absurdity of the position came to his mind.

The tent was small, heavily draped with green and smelling of musk. It was divided into two sections by an immovable curtain that hung from the roof to within a few feet of the floor. The only furniture on Loder's side was one low chair, and the only light a faint radiance that, coming from the invisible half of the pavilion, spread across the floor in a soft, uncertain, then his hesitation was brought to an end.

"Please sit down," said a low, soft voice.

For a further moment he stood undecided. The voice sounded so unexpectedly near. In the quiet and darkness of the place it seemed to possess a disproportionate weight, almost the weight of a familiar thing. Almost a sudden, unanalyzed touch of relief, he located the impression. It was the familiarity to Lady Bramfell's sweet, low tones that had stirred his mind.

With a sense of satisfaction he drew the chair forward and sat down.

Then for the first time he saw that on the other side of the gauze partition and below it by a few inches was a small table of polished wood, on which stood an open book, a crystal ball and a gold dish filled with ink. These were arranged on the side of the table nearest to him, the farther side being out of his range of vision. An amused interest touched him as he made his position more comfortable. Whoever this woman was, she had an eye for stage management, she knew how to marshal her effects. He found himself waiting with some curiosity for the next injunction from behind the curtain.

"The art of crystal gazing," began the sweet, slow voice after a pause, "is the art of the oldest known arts." Loder sat forward. The thought of Lady Bramfell mingled disconcertingly with some other thought more distant and less easy to secure.

"To obtain the best results," went on the seer, "the subject lays his uncovered hands outspread upon a smooth surface." It was evident that the invisible priestess was reading from the open book, for when the word "surface" was reached there was a slight stir that indicated the changing of position, and when the voice came again it was in a different tone.

"Please lay your hands, palms downward, upon the table."

Loder smiled to himself in the darkness. He pictured Chilcote with his nerves and his impatience going through this ordeal; then in good humored silence he leaned forward and obeyed the command. His hands found the smooth surface of the table in the bar of light from the unseen lamp.

There was a second in which the seer was silent; then he fancied that she raised her head.

"You must take off your rings," she said smoothly. "Any metal interferes with the sympathetic current."

At any other time Loder would have laughed, but the request so casually and graciously made sent all possibility of irony far into the background. The thought of Chilcote and of the one flaw in their otherwise flawless scheme rose to his mind. Instinctively he half withdrew his hands.

"Where is the sympathetic current?" he asked quietly. His thoughts were busy with the question of whether he would or would not be justified in beating an undignified retreat.