

# THE Masquerader

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Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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Eve, looking back, saw the expression. It attracted and 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 faded 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 relapsed into silence. He was the soul 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 ingenuous 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 Bramfeld and the pater are working it out between them, so if Lady Bramfeld or Lady Astrup happen to drop in or a handkerchief this evening I've got to be here to pick it up."

"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 sounded. 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. 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 quietly.

"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 unpardonably absent-minded, 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 d'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 d'you do, sir?" he responded, with a smile. "I congratulate you on looking so-uncommon well. I was just telling Mrs. Chilcote that I hold a commission for Lady Astrup 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 said, and he wondered if it was his imagination that made the word sound slightly eager.

"About that matter of Blessington," he began; then he stopped. Bramfeld had reached them.

Again the sense of Eve's aloofness hung as his host approached. In another moment she would be lost to him among this throng of strangers—claimed by them as by right.

"Eve," he said involuntarily and under his breath.

She half paused and turned toward him. "Yes?" she said, and he wondered if it was his imagination that made the word sound slightly eager.

"About that matter of Blessington," he began; then he stopped. Bramfeld had reached them.

The little man came up smiling and with an outstretched hand. "There's no penalty for separating husband and wife, there, Mrs. Chilcote?" How are you, Chilcote?" He turned from one to the other with the quick, noiseless manner that always characterized him.

Loder turned aside to hide his vexation, but Eve greeted their host with her usual self possessed smile.

"You are exempt from all penalties tonight," she said. Then she turned to greet the members of his party who had strolled across from the window in his wake.

As she moved aside Bramfeld looked at Loder. "Well, Chilcote, have you dipped into the future yet?" he asked with a laugh.

Loder echoed the laugh, but said nothing. In his uncertainty at the question he reverted to his old resource of silence.

Bramfeld raised his eyebrows. "What?" he said. "Don't tell me that my sister-in-law hasn't engaged you as a victim?" Then he turned in Eve's direction. "You've heard of our new *downstairs* Mrs. Chilcote?"



"There's no penalty for separating husband and wife!"

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."

Bramfeld 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 Witchester? He's next on my list for the crystal business."

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

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

"For goodness' sake, Bobby, shut up!" Bramfeld'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."

Eve broke in. "We were always finding gaps that had to be filled up. Never mind about Lord Witchester. Get a substitute. It won't count if Lillian doesn't know."

Blessington wavered as she spoke. His eyes wandered round the party and again rested on Bramfeld.

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

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

"A very good idea," she said. "Who wants to see the future if not a person seems disreputable 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 explanatory tone one might adopt toward an incorrigible child. Loder felt this, but the glist of a remark always came to him first, its mode of expression later. The fact that it was Blessington whom he had encountered—Blessington to whom he had spoken with vague politeness—came to him with a sense of unpleasantness. He was not to blame in the matter, nevertheless he blamed himself. He was annoyed that he should have made the slip in Eve's presence.

They were moving forward, nearing the press of people in the second room, when Eve spoke, and the fact filled him with an added sense of annoyance. People smiled and bowed to her from every side; one woman leaned forward as they passed and whispered something in her ear. Again the sensation of futility and vexation filled him; again he realized how palpable was the place she held in the world. Then, as his feelings reached their height and speech seemed forced upon him, a small man with a round face, catching a glimpse of Eve, darted from a circle of people gathered in one of the windows and came quickly toward them. With an unjust touch of irritation he recognized Loder Bramfeld.

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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 Indian mountains had faded, like a crayon study in which the tones have merged and gradually lost character. The past had paled before the present, as golden hair might pale before black. The simile 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. Everybody laughed, and at the same moment Blessington came quickly across the room and joined the group. "Hello!" he said. "Anybody seen Witchester? He's next on my list for the crystal business."

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