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The Masquerader

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THE MASQUERADER

I

Two incidents, widely different in character yet bound together by results, marked the night of January the twenty-third. On that night the blackest fog within a four years' memory fell upon certain portions of London, and also on that night came the first announcement of the border risings against the Persian government in the province of Khorasan the announcement that, speculated upon, even smiled at, at the time, assumed such significance in the light of after events.

At eight o'clock the news spread through the House of Commons; but at nine men in the inner lobbies were gossiping, not so much upon how far Russia, while ostensibly upholding the Shah, had pulled the strings by which the insurgents danced, as upon the manner in which the 'St. George's Gazette', the Tory evening newspaper, had seized upon the incident and shaken it in the faces of the government.

More than once before, Lakely—the owner and editor of the 'St. George's'—had stepped outside the decorous circle of tradition and taken a plunge into modern journalism, but to-night he essayed deeper waters than before, and under an almost sensational heading declared that in this apparently innocent border rising we had less an outcome of mere racial antagonism than a first faint index of a long-cherished Russian scheme, growing to a gradual maturity under the "drift" policy of the present British government.

The effect produced by this pronouncement, if strong, was varied. Members of the Opposition saw, or thought they saw, a reflection of it in the smiling unconcern on the Ministerial benches; and the government had an uneasy sense that behind the newly kindled interest on the other side of the House lay some mysterious scenting of bat-

tle from afar off. But though these impressions ran like electricity through the atmosphere, nothing tangible marked their passage, and the ordinary business of the House proceeded until half-past eleven, when an adjournment was moved.

The first man to hurry from his place was John Chilcote, member for East Wark. He passed out of the House quickly, with the half-furtive quickness that marks a self-absorbed man; and as he passed the policeman standing stolidly under the arched door-way of the big court-yard he swerved a little, as if startled out of his thoughts. He realized his swerve almost before it was accomplished, and pulled himself together with nervous irritability.

"Foggy night, constables," he said, with elaborate carelessness.

"Foggy night, sir, and thickening up west," responded the man.

"Ah, indeed!" Chilcote's answer was absent. The constable's cheery voice jarred on him, and for the second time he was conscious of senseless irritation.

Without a further glance at the man, he slipped out into the court-yard and turned towards the main gate.

At the gate-way two cab lamps showed through the mist of shifting fog like the eyes of a great cat, and the familiar "Hansom, sir?" came to him indistinctly.

He paused by force of custom; and, stepping forward, had almost touched the open door when a new impulse caused him to draw back.

"No," he said, hurriedly. "No. I'll walk."

The cabman muttered, lashed his horse, and with a clatter of hoofs and harness wheeled away; while Chilcote, still with uncertain hastiness, crossed the road in the direction of Whitehall.

About the Abbey the fog had partially lifted, and in the railed garden that faces the Houses of Parliament the statues were visible in a spectral way. But Chilcote's glance was unstable and indifferent; he skirted the railings heedlessly, and, crossing the road with the speed of long familiarity, gained Whitehall on the lefthand side.

There the fog had dropped, and, looking upward towards Trafalgar Square, it seemed that the chain of lamps extended little farther than the Horse Guards, and that beyond lay nothing.

Unconscious of this capricious alternation between darkness and light, Chilcote continued his course. To a close observer the manner of his going had both interest and suggestion; for though he walked on, apparently self-engrossed, yet at every dozen steps he started at some sound or some touch, like a man whose nervous system is painfully overstrung.

Maintaining his haste, he went deliberately forward, oblivious of the fact that at each step the curtain of darkness about him became closer, damper, more tangible; that at each second the passers-by jostled each other with greater frequency. Then, abruptly, with a sudden realization of what had happened, he stood quite still. Without anticipation or preparation he had walked full into the thickness of the fog—a thickness so dense that, as by an enchanter's wand, the figures of a moment before melted, the street lamps were sucked up into the night.

His first feeling was a sense of panic at the sudden isolation, his second a thrill of nervous apprehension at the oblivion that had allowed him to be so entrapped. The second feeling outweighed the first. He moved forward, then paused again, uncertain of himself. Finally, with the consciousness that inaction was unbearable, he moved on once more, his eyes wide open, one hand thrust out as a protection and guide.

The fog had closed in behind him as heavily as in front, shutting off all possibility of retreat; all about him in the darkness was a confusion of voices—cheerful, dubious, alarmed, or angry; now and then a sleeve brushed his or a hand touched him tentatively. It was a strange moment, a moment of possibilities, to which the crunching wheels, the oaths and laughter from the blocked traffic of the roadway, made a continuous accompaniment.

Keeping well to the left, Chilcote still beat on; there was a persistence in his movements that almost amounted to fear—a fear born of the solitude filled with innumerable sounds. For a space he groped about him without result, then his fingers touched the cold surface of a shuttered shop-front, and a thrill of reassurance passed

through him. With renewed haste, and clinging to his landmark as a blind man might, he started forward with fresh impetus.

For a dozen paces he moved rapidly and unevenly, then the natural result occurred. He collided with a man coming in the opposite direction.

The shock was abrupt. Both men swore simultaneously, then both laughed. The whole thing was casual, but Chilcote was in that state of mind when even the commonplace becomes abnormal. The other man's exclamation, the other man's laugh, struck on his nerves; coming out of the darkness, they sounded like a repetition of his own.

Nine out of every ten men in London, given the same social position and the same education, might reasonably be expected to express annoyance or amusement in the same manner, possibly in the same tone of voice; and Chilcote remembered this almost at the moment of his nervous jar.

"Beastly fog!" he said, aloud. "I'm trying to find Grosvenor Square, but the chances seem rather small."

The other laughed again, and again the laugh upset Chilcote. He wondered uncomfortably if he was becoming a prey to illusions. But the stranger spoke before the question had solved itself.

"I'm afraid they are small," he said. "It would be almost hard to find one's way to the devil on a night like this."

Chilcote made a murmur of amusement and drew back against the shop.

"Yes. We can see now where the blind man scores in the matter of salvation. This is almost a repetition of the fog of six years ago. Were you out in that?"

It was a habit of his to jump from one sentence to another, a habit that had grown of late.

"No." The stranger had also groped his way to the shopfront.

"No, I was out of England six years ago."

"You were lucky." Chilcote turned up the collar of his coat. "It was an atrocious fog, as black as this, but more universal. I remember it well. It was the night Lexington made his great sugar speech. Some of us were found on Lambeth Bridge at three in the morning, having left the House at twelve."

Chilcote seldom indulged in reminiscences, but this conversation with an unseen companion was more like a soliloquy than a dialogue. He was almost surprised into an exclamation when the other caught up his words.

"Ah! The sugar speech!" he said. "Odd that I should have been looking it up only yesterday. What a magnificent dressing-up of a dry subject it was! What a career Lexington promised in those days!"

Chilcote changed his position.

"You are interested in the muddle down at Westminster?" he asked, sarcastically.

"I—?" It was the turn of the stranger to draw back a step. "Oh, I read my newspaper with the other five million, that is all. I am an outsider." His voice sounded curt; the warmth that admiration had brought into it a moment before had frozen abruptly.

"An outsider!" Chilcote repeated. "What an enviable word!"

"Possibly, to those who are well inside the ring. But let us go back to Lexington. What a pinnacle the man reached, and what a drop he had! It has always seemed to me an extraordinary instance of the human leaven running through us all. What was the real cause of his collapse?" he asked, suddenly. "Was it drugs or drink? I have often wished to get at the truth."

Again Chilcote changed his attitude.

"Is truth ever worth getting at?" he asked, irrelevantly.

"In the case of a public man—yes. He exchanges his privacy for the interest of the masses. If he gives the masses the details of his success, why not the details of his failure? But was it drink that sucked him under?"

"No." Chilcote's response came after a pause.

"Drugs?"

Again Chilcote hesitated. And at the moment of his indecision a woman brushed past him, laughing boisterously. The sound jarred him.

"Was it drugs?" the stranger went on easily. "I have always had a theory that it was."

"Yes. It was morphia." The answer came before Chilcote had realized it. The woman's laugh at the stranger's quiet persistence had contrived to draw it from him. Instantly he had spoken he looked about him quickly, like one who has for a moment forgotten a necessary vigilance.

There was silence while the stranger thought over the information just given him. Then he spoke again, with a new touch of vehemence.

"So I imagined," he said. "Though, on my soul, I never really credited it. To have gained so much, and to have thrown it away for a common vice!" He made an exclamation of disgust.

Chilcote gave an unsteady laugh. "You judge hardly," he said.

The other repeated his sound of contempt. "Justly so. No man has the right to squander what another would give his soul for. It lessens the general respect for power."

"You are a believer in power?" The tone was sarcastic, but the sarcasm sounded thin.

"Yes. All power is the outcome of individuality, either past or present. I find no sentiment for the man who plays with it."

The quiet contempt of the tone stung Chilcote.

"Do you imagine that Lexington made no fight?" he asked, impulsively. "Can't you picture the man's struggle while the vice that had been slave gradually became master?" He stopped to take breath, and in the cold pause that followed it seemed to him that the other made a murmur of incredulity.

"Perhaps you think of morphia as a pleasure?" he added. "Think of it, instead, as a tyrant—that tortures the mind if held to, and the body if cast off." Urged by the darkness and the silence of his com-

panion, the rein of his speech had loosened. In that moment he was not Chilcote the member for East Wark, whose moods and silences were proverbial, but Chilcote the man whose mind craved the relief of speech.

"You talk as the world talks—out of ignorance and self-righteousness," he went on. "Before you condemn Lexington you should put yourself in his place—"

"As you do?" the other laughed.

Unsuspecting and inoffensive as the laugh was, it startled Chilcote. With a sudden alarm he pulled himself up.

"I—?" He tried to echo the laugh, but the attempt fell flat. "Oh, I merely speak from—from De Quincey. But I believe this fog is shifting—I really believe it is shifting. Can you oblige me with a light? I had almost forgotten that a man may still smoke though he has been deprived of sight." He spoke fast and disjointedly. He was overwhelmed by the idea that he had let himself go, and possessed by the wish to obliterate the consequences. As he talked he fumbled; for his cigarette-case.

His bead was bent as he searched for it nervously. Without looking up, he was conscious that the cloud of fog that held him prisoner was lifting, rolling away, closing back again, preparatory to final disappearance. Having found the case, he put a cigarette between his lips and raised his hand at the moment that the stranger drew a match across his box.

For a second each stared blankly at the other's face, suddenly made visible by the lifting of the fog. The match in the stranger's hand burned down till it scorched his fingers, and, feeling the pain, he laughed and let it drop.

"Of all odd things!" he said. Then he broke off. The circumstance was too novel for ordinary remark.

By one of those rare occurrences, those chances that seem too wild for real life and yet belong to no other sphere, the two faces so strangely hidden and strangely revealed were identical, feature for

feature. It seemed to each man that he looked not at the face of another, but at his own face reflected in a flawless looking-glass.

Of the two, the stranger was the first to regain self-possession. Seeing Chilcote's bewilderment, he came to his rescue with brusque tactfulness.

"The position is decidedly odd," he said. "But after all, why should we be so surprised? Nature can't be eternally original; she must dry up sometimes, and when she gets a good model why shouldn't she use it twice?" He drew back, surveying Chilcote whimsically. "But, pardon me, you are still waiting for that light!"

Chilcote still held the cigarette between his lips. The paper had become dry, and he moistened it as he leaned towards his companion.

"Don't mind me," he said. "I'm rather—rather unstrung to-night, and this thing gave me a jar. To be candid, my imagination took head in the fog, and I got to fancy I was talking to myself—"

"And pulled up to find the fancy in some way real?"

"Yes. Something like that."

Both were silent for a moment. Chilcote pulled hard at his cigarette, then, remembering his obligations, he turned quickly to the other.

"Won't you smoke?" he asked.

The stranger accepted a cigarette from the case held out to him; and as he did so the extraordinary likeness to himself struck Chilcote with added force. Involuntarily he put out his hand and touched the other's arm.

"It's my nerves!" he said, in explanation. "They make me want to feel that you are substantial. Nerves play such beastly tricks!" He laughed awkwardly.

The other glanced up. His expression on the moment was slightly surprised, slightly contemptuous, but he changed it instantly to conventional interest. "I am afraid I am not an authority on nerves," he said.

But Chilcote was preoccupied. His thoughts had turned into another channel.

"How old are you?" he asked, suddenly.

The other did not answer immediately. "My age?" he said at last, slowly. "Oh, I believe I shall be thirty-six to-morrow—to be quite accurate."

Chilcote lifted his head quickly.

"Why do you use that tone?" he asked. "I am six months older than you, and I only wish it was six years. Six years nearer oblivion—"

Again a slight incredulous contempt crossed the other's eyes.

"Oblivion?" he said. "Where are your ambitions?"

"They don't exist."

"Don't exist? Yet you voice your country? I concluded that much in the fog."

Chilcote laughed sarcastically.

"When one has voiced one's country for six years one gets hoarse—it's a natural consequence."

The other smiled. "Ah, discontent!" he said. "The modern canker. But we must both be getting under way. Good-night! Shall we shake hands—to prove that we are genuinely material?"

Chilcote had been standing unusually still, following the stranger's words—caught by his self-reliance and impressed by his personality. Now, as he ceased to speak, he moved quickly forward, impelled by a nervous curiosity.

"Why should we just hail each other and pass—like the proverbial ships?" he said, impulsively. "If Nature was careless enough to let the reproduction meet the original, she must abide the consequences."

The other laughed, but his laugh was short. "Oh, I don't know. Our roads lie differently. You would get nothing out of me, and I—" He stopped and again laughed shortly. "No," he said; "I'd be content

to pass, if I were you. The unsuccessful man is seldom a profitable study. Shall we say good-night?"

He took Chilcote's hand for an instant; then, crossing the foot-path, he passed into the road-way towards the Strand.

It was done in a moment; but with his going a sense of loss fell upon Chilcote. He stood for a space, newly conscious of unfamiliar faces and unfamiliar voices in the stream of passersby; then, suddenly mastered by an impulse, he wheeled rapidly and darted after the tall, lean figure so ridiculously like his own.

Half-way across Trafalgar Square he overtook the stranger. He had paused on one of the small stone islands that break the current of traffic, and was waiting for an opportunity to cross the street. In the glare of light from the lamp above his head, Chilcote saw for the first time that, under a remarkable neatness of appearance, his clothes were well worn—almost shabby. The discovery struck him with something stronger than surprise. The idea of poverty seemed incongruous in connection with the reliance, the reserve, the personality of the man. With a certain embarrassed haste he stepped forward and touched his arm.

"Look here," he said, as the other turned quietly. "I have followed you to exchange cards. It can't injure either of us, and I—I have a wish to know my other self." He laughed nervously as he drew out his card-case.

The stranger watched him in silence. There was the same faint contempt, but also there was a reluctant interest in his glance, as it passed from the fingers fumbling with the case to the pale face with the square jaw, straight mouth, and level eyebrows drawn low over the gray eyes. When at last the card was held out to him he took it without remark and slipped it into his pocket.

Chilcote looked at him eagerly. "Now the exchange?" he said.

For a second the stranger did not respond. Then, almost unexpectedly, he smiled.

"After all, if it amuses you—" he said; and, searching in his waistcoat pocket, he drew out the required card.

"It will leave you quite unenlightened," he added. "The name of a failure never spells anything." With another smile, partly amused, partly ironical, he stepped from the little island and disappeared into the throng of traffic.

Chilcote stood for an instant gazing at the point where he had vanished; then, turning to the lamp, he lifted the card and read the name it bore: "Mr. John Loder, 13 Clifford's Inn."

II

On the morning following the night of fog Chilcote woke at nine. He woke at the moment that his man Allsopp tiptoed across the room and laid the salver with his early cup of tea on the table beside the bed.

For several seconds he lay with his eyes shut; the effort of opening them on a fresh day—the intimate certainty of what he would see on opening them—seemed to weight his lids. The heavy, half-closed curtains; the blinds severely drawn; the great room with its splendid furniture, its sober coloring, its scent of damp London winter; above all, Allsopp, silent, respectful, and respectable—were things to dread.

A full minute passed while he still feigned sleep. He heard Allsopp stir discreetly, then the inevitable information broke the silence:

"Nine o'clock, sir!"

He opened his eyes, murmured something, and closed them again.

The man moved to the window, quietly pulled back the curtains and half drew the blind.

"Better night, sir, I hope?" he ventured, softly.

Chilcote had drawn the bedclothes over his face to screen himself from the daylight, murky though it was.

"Yes," he responded. "Those beastly nightmares didn't trouble me, for once." He shivered a little as at some recollection. "But don't talk—don't remind me of them. I hate a man who has no originality." He spoke sharply. At times he showed an almost childish irritation over trivial things.

Allsopp took the remark in silence. Crossing the wide room, he began to lay out his master's clothes. The action affected Chilcote to fresh annoyance.

"Confound it!" he said. "I'm sick of that routine: I can see you laying out my winding-sheet the day of my burial. Leave those things. Come back in half an hour."

Allsopp allowed himself one glance at his master's figure huddled in the great bed; then, laying aside the coat he was holding, he moved to the door. With his fingers on the handle he paused.

"Will you breakfast in your own room, sir — or down-stairs?"

Chilcote drew the clothes more tightly round his shoulders.

"Oh, anywhere — nowhere!" he said. "I don't care."

Allsopp softly withdrew.

Left to himself, Chilcote sat up in bed and lifted the salver to his knees. The sudden movement jarred him physically; he drew a handkerchief from under the pillow and wiped his forehead; then he held his hand to the light and studied it. The hand looked sallow and unsteady. With a nervous gesture he thrust the salver back upon the table and slid out of bed.

Moving hastily across the room, he stopped before one of the tall wardrobes and swung the door open; then after a furtive glance around the room he thrust his hand into the recesses of a shelf and fumbled there.

The thing he sought was evidently not hard to find. For almost at once he withdrew his hand and moved from the wardrobe to a table beside the fireplace, carrying a small glass tube filled with tabloids.

On the table were a decanter, a siphon, and a water-jug. Mixing some whiskey, he uncorked the tube, again he glanced apprehensively towards the door, then with a very nervous hand dropped two tabloids into the glass.

While they dissolved he stood with his hand on the table and his eyes fixed on the floor, evidently restraining his impatience. Instantly they had disappeared he seized the glass and drained it at a