

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

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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 downstairs?”

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.

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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 draught, replaced the bottle in the wardrobe, and, shivering slightly in the raw air, slipped back into bed.

When Allsopp returned he was sitting up, a cigarette between his lips, the teacup standing empty on the salver. The nervous irritability had gone from his manner. He no longer moved jerkily, his eyes looked brighter, his pale skin more healthy.

"Ah, Allsopp," he said, "there *are* some moments in life, after all. It isn't all blank wall."

"I ordered breakfast in the small morning-room, sir," said Allsopp, without a change of expression.

Chilcote breakfasted at ten. His appetite, always fickle, was particularly uncertain in the early hours. He helped himself to some fish, but sent away his plate untouched; then, having drunk two cups of tea, he pushed back his chair, lighted a fresh cigarette, and shook out the morning's newspaper.

Twice he shook it out and twice turned it, but the reluctance to fix his mind upon it made him dally.

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The effect of the morphia tabloids was still apparent in the greater steadiness of his hand and eye, the regained quiet of his susceptibilities, but the respite was temporary and lethargic. The early days—the days of six years ago, when these tabloids meant an even sweep of thought, lucidity of brain, a balance of judgment in thought and effort—were days of the past. As he had said of Lexington and his vice, the slave had become master.

As he folded the paper in a last attempt at interest, the door opened and his secretary came a step or two into the room.

"Good-morning, sir!" he said. "Forgive me for being so untimely."

He was a fresh-mannered, bright-eyed boy of twenty-three. His breezy alertness, his deference, as to a man who had attained what he aspired to, amused and depressed Chilcote by turns.

"Good-morning, Blessington. What is it now?" He sighed through habit, and, putting up his hand, warded off a ray of sun that had forced itself through the misty atmosphere as if by mistake.

The boy smiled. "It's that business of the Wark timber contract, sir," he said. "You promised you'd look into it to-day; you know you've shelved it for a week already, and Craig, Burnage are rather clamoring for an answer." He moved forward and laid the papers he was carrying on the table beside Chilcote. "I'm sorry to be such a nuisance," he added. "I hope your nerves aren't worrying you to-day?"

Chilcote was toying with the papers. At the word nerves he glanced up suspiciously. But Blessington's ingenuous face satisfied him.

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"No," he said. "I settled my nerves last night with—with a bromide. I knew that fog would upset me unless I took precautions."

"I'm glad of that, sir—though I'd avoid bromides. Bad habit to set up. But this Wark business—I'd like to get it under way, if you have no objection."

Chilcote passed his fingers over the papers. "Were you out in that fog last night, Blessington?"

"No, sir. I supped with some people at the Savoy, and we just missed it. It was very partial, I believe."

"So I believe."

Blessington put his hand to his neat tie and pulled it. He was extremely polite, but he had an inordinate sense of duty.

"Forgive me, sir," he said, "but about that contract—I know I'm a frightful bore."

"Oh, the contract!" Chilcote looked about him absently. "By-the-way, did you see anything of my wife yesterday? What did she do last night?"

"Mrs. Chilcote gave me tea yesterday afternoon. She told me she was dining at Lady Sabinet's, and looking in at one or two places later." He eyed his papers in Chilcote's listless hand.

Chilcote smiled satirically. "Eve is very true to society," he said. "I couldn't dine at the Sabinets' if it was to make me premier. They have a butler who is an institution—a sort of heirloom in the family. He is fat, and breathes audibly. Last time I lunched there he haunted me for a whole night."

Blessington laughed gayly. "Mrs. Chilcote doesn't see ghosts, sir," he said; "but if I may suggest—"

Chilcote tapped his fingers on the table.

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"No. Eve doesn't see ghosts. We rather miss sympathy there."

Blessington governed his impatience. He stood still for some seconds, then glanced down at his pointed boot.

"If you will be lenient to my persistency, sir, I would like to remind you—"

Chilcote lifted his head with a flash of irritability.

"Confound it, Blessington!" he exclaimed. "Am I never to be left in peace? Am I never to sit down to a meal without having work thrust upon me? Work—work—perpetually work? I have heard no other word in the last six years. I declare there are times"—he rose suddenly from his seat and turned to the window—"there are times when I feel that for sixpence I'd chuck it all—the whole beastly round—"

Startled by his vehemence, Blessington wheeled towards him.

"Not your political career, sir?"

There was a moment in which Chilcote hesitated, a moment in which the desire that had filled his mind for months rose to his lips and hung there; then the question, the incredulity in Blessington's face, chilled it and it fell back into silence.

"I—I didn't say that," he murmured. "You young men jump to conclusions, Blessington."

"Forgive me, sir. I never meant to imply retirement. Why, Rickshaw, Vale, Cressham, and the whole Wark crowd would be about your ears like flies if such a thing were even breathed—now more than ever, since these Persian rumors. By-the-way, is there anything real in this border business? The *St. George's* came out rather strong last night."

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Chilcote had moved back to the table. His face was pale from his outburst and his fingers toyed restlessly with the open newspaper.

"I haven't seen the *St. George's*," he said, hastily. "Lakely is always ready to shake the red rag where Russia is concerned; whether we are to enter the arena is another matter. But what about Craig, Burnage? I think you mentioned something of a contract."

"Oh, don't worry about that, sir." Blessington had caught the twitching at the corners of Chilcote's mouth, the nervous sharpness of his voice. "I can put Craig, Burnage off. If they have an answer by Thursday it will be time enough." He began to collect his papers, but Chilcote stopped him.

"Wait," he said, veering suddenly. "Wait. I'll see to it now. I'll feel more myself when I've done something. I'll come with you to the study."

He walked hastily across the room; then, with his hand on the door, he paused.

"You go first, Blessington," he said. "I'll—I'll follow you in ten minutes. I must glance through the newspapers first."

Blessington looked uncertain. "You won't forget, sir?"

"Forget? Of course not."

Still doubtfully, Blessington left the room and closed the door.

Once alone, Chilcote walked slowly back to the table, drew up his chair, and sat down with his eyes on the white cloth, the paper lying unheeded beside him.

Time passed. A servant came into the room to remove the breakfast. Chilcote moved slightly when necessary, but otherwise retained his attitude. The

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servant, having finished his task, replenished the fire and left the room. Chilcote still sat on.

At last, feeling numbed, he rose and crossed to the fireplace. The clock on the mantel-piece stared him in the face. He looked at it, started slightly, then drew out his watch. Watch and clock corresponded. Each marked twelve o'clock. With a nervous motion he leaned forward and pressed the electric bell long and hard.

Instantly a servant answered.

"Is Mr. Blessington in the study?" Chilcote asked.

"He was there, sir, five minutes back."

Chilcote looked relieved.

"All right! Tell him I have gone out—had to go out. Something important. You understand?"

"I understand, sir."

But before the words had been properly spoken Chilcote had passed the man and walked into the hall.