

THE Masquerader

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Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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CHAPTER II.

ON the morning following the night of fog Chilcote woke at 9. He woke at the moment that his man Allsopp tiptoed across the room and add 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 the 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 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. 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 whisky, he uncorked the tube. Again he glanced apprehensively toward 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 draft, 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 10. 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. 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 today. 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 today?"

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

"No," he said. "I settled my nerves last night 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 din-



"I feel that for sixpence I'd chuck it all,"

ing 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

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