

The Dawn of a To-morrow

By

Frances Hodgson

I

There are always two ways of looking at a thing, frequently there are six or seven; but two ways of looking at a London fog are quite enough. When it is thick and yellow in the streets and stings a man's throat and lungs as he breathes it, an awakening in the early morning is either an unearthly and grewsome, or a mysteriously enclosing, secluding, and comfortable thing. If one awakens in a healthy body, and with a clear brain rested by normal sleep and retaining memories of a normally agreeable yesterday, one may lie watching the housemaid building the fire; and after she has swept the hearth and put things in order, lie watching the flames of the blazing and crackling wood catch the coals and set them blazing also, and dancing merrily and filling corners with a glow; and in so lying and realizing that leaping light and warmth and a soft bed are good things, one may turn over on one's back, stretching arms and legs luxuriously, drawing deep breaths and smiling at a knowledge of the fog outside which makes half-past eight o'clock on a December morning as dark as twelve o'clock on a December night. Under such conditions the soft, thick, yellow gloom has its picturesque and even humorous aspect. One feels enclosed by it at once fantastically and cosily, and is inclined to revel in imaginings of the picture outside, its Rembrandt lights and orange yellows, the halos about the street-lamps, the illumination of shop-windows, the flare of torches stuck up over coster barrows and coffee-stands, the shadows on the faces of the men and women selling and buying beside them. Refreshed by sleep

and comfort and surrounded by light, warmth, and good cheer, it is easy to face the day, to confront going out into the fog and feeling a sort of pleasure in its mysteries. This is one way of looking at it, but only one.

The other way is marked by enormous differences.

A man--he had given his name to the people of the house as Antony Dart--awakened in a third-story bedroom in a lodging-house in a poor street in London, and as his consciousness returned to him, its slow and reluctant movings confronted the second point of view--marked by enormous differences. He had not slept two consecutive hours through the night, and when he had slept he had been tormented by dreary dreams, which were more full of misery because of their elusive vagueness, which kept his tortured brain on a wearying strain of effort to reach some definite understanding of them. Yet when he awakened the consciousness of being again alive was an awful thing. If the dreams could have faded into blankness and all have passed with the passing of the night, how he could have thanked whatever gods there be! Only not to awake--only not to awake! But he had awakened.

The clock struck nine as he did so, consequently he knew the hour. The lodging-house slavey had aroused him by coming to light the fire. She had set her candle on the hearth and done her work as stealthily as possible, but he had been disturbed, though he had made a desperate

effort to struggle back into sleep. That was no use--no use. He was awake and he was in the midst of it all again. Without the sense of luxurious comfort he opened his eyes and turned upon his back, throwing out his arms flatly, so that he lay as in the form of a cross, in heavy weariness and anguish. For months he had awakened each morning after such a night and had so lain like a crucified thing.

As he watched the painful flickering of the damp and smoking wood and coal he remembered this and thought that there had been a lifetime of such awakenings, not knowing that the morbidness of a fagged brain blotted out the memory of more normal days and told him fantastic lies which were but a hundredth part truth. He could see only the hundredth part truth, and it assumed proportions so huge that he could see nothing else. In such a state the human brain is an infernal machine and its workings can only be conquered if the mortal thing which lives with it--day and night, night and day--has learned to separate its controllable from its seemingly uncontrollable atoms, and can silence its clamor on its way to madness.

Antony Dart had not learned this thing and the clamor had had its hideous way with him. Physicians would have given a name to his mental and physical condition. He had heard these names often--applied to men the strain of whose lives had been like the strain of his own, and had left them as it had left him--jaded, joyless, breaking things. Some of them had been broken and had died or were dragging out bruised and

tormented days in their own homes or in mad-houses. He always shuddered when he heard their names, and rebelled with sick fear against the mere mention of them. They had worked as he had worked, they had been stricken with the delirium of accumulation--accumulation--as he had been. They had been caught in the rush and swirl of the great maelstrom, and had been borne round and round in it, until having grasped every coveted thing tossing upon its circling waters, they themselves had been flung upon the shore with both hands full, the rocks about them strewn with rich possessions, while they lay prostrate and gazed at all life had brought with dull, hopeless, anguished eyes. He knew--if the worst came to the worst--what would be said of him, because he had heard it said of others. "He worked too hard--he worked too hard." He was sick of hearing it. What was wrong with the world--what was wrong with man, as Man--if work could break him like this? If one believed in Deity, the living creature It breathed into being must be a perfect thing--not one to be wearied, sickened, tortured by the life Its breathing had created. A mere man would disdain to build a thing so poor and incomplete. A mere human engineer who constructed an engine whose workings were perpetually at fault--which went wrong when called upon to do the labor it was made for--who would not scoff at it and cast it aside as a piece of worthless bungling?

"Something is wrong," he muttered, lying flat upon his cross and staring at the yellow haze which had crept through crannies in window-sashes into the room. "Someone is wrong. Is it I--or You?"

His thin lips drew themselves back against his teeth in a mirthless smile which was like a grin.

"Yes," he said. "I am pretty far gone. I am beginning to talk to myself about God. Bryan did it just before he was taken to Dr. Hewletts' place and cut his throat."

He had not led a specially evil life; he had not broken laws, but the subject of Deity was not one which his scheme of existence had included. When it had haunted him of late he had felt it an untoward and morbid sign. The thing had drawn him--drawn him; he had complained against it, he had argued, sometimes he knew--shuddering--that he had raved. Something had seemed to stand aside and watch his being and his thinking. Something which filled the universe had seemed to wait, and to have waited through all the eternal ages, to see what he--one man--would do. At times a great appalled wonder had swept over him at his realization that he had never known or thought of it before. It had been there always--through all the ages that had passed. And sometimes--once or twice--the thought had in some unspeakable, untranslatable way brought him a moment's calm.

But at other times he had said to himself--with a shivering soul cowering within him--that this was only part of it all and was a beginning, perhaps, of religious monomania.

During the last week he had known what he was going to do--he had made up his mind. This abject horror through which others had let themselves be dragged to madness or death he would not endure. The end should come quickly, and no one should be smitten aghast by seeing or knowing how it came. In the crowded shabbier streets of London there were lodging-houses where one, by taking precautions, could end his life in such a manner as would blot him out of any world where such a man as himself had been known. A pistol, properly managed, would obliterate resemblance to any human thing. Months ago through chance talk he had heard how it could be done--and done quickly. He could leave a misleading letter. He had planned what it should be--the story it should tell of a disheartened mediocre venturer of his poor all returning bankrupt and humiliated from Australia, ending existence in such pennilessness that the parish must give him a pauper's grave. What did it matter where a man lay, so that he slept--slept--slept? Surely with one's brains scattered one would sleep soundly anywhere.

He had come to the house the night before, dressed shabbily with the pitiable respectability of a defeated man. He had entered droopingly with bent shoulders and hopeless hang of head. In his own sphere he was a man who held himself well. He had let fall a few dispirited sentences when he had engaged his back room from the woman of the house, and she had recognized him as one of the luckless. In fact, she had hesitated a moment before his unreliable look until he had taken out money from his pocket and paid his rent for a week in advance. She would have that at least for her trouble, he had said to himself. He should not occupy the

room after to-morrow. In his own home some days would pass before his household began to make inquiries. He had told his servants that he was going over to Paris for a change. He would be safe and deep in his pauper's grave a week before they asked each other why they did not hear from him. All was in order. One of the mocking agonies was that living was done for. He had ceased to live. Work, pleasure, sun, moon, and stars had lost their meaning. He stood and looked at the most radiant loveliness of land and sky and sea and felt nothing. Success brought greater wealth each day without stirring a pulse of pleasure, even in triumph. There was nothing left but the awful days and awful nights to which he knew physicians could give their scientific name, but had no healing for. He had gone far enough. He would go no farther. To-morrow it would have been over long hours. And there would have been no public declaiming over the humiliating pitifulness of his end. And what did it matter?

How thick the fog was outside--thick enough for a man to lose himself in it. The yellow mist which had crept in under the doors and through the crevices of the window-sashes gave a ghostly look to the room--a ghastly, abnormal look, he said to himself. The fire was smouldering instead of blazing. But what did it matter? He was going out. He had not bought the pistol last night--like a fool. Somehow his brain had been so tired and crowded that he had forgotten.

"Forgotten." He mentally repeated the word as he got out of bed. By this time to-morrow he should have forgotten everything. THIS TIME

TO-MORROW. His mind repeated that also, as he began to dress himself.

Where should he be? Should he be anywhere? Suppose he awakened again--

to something as bad as this? How did a man get out of his body? After the crash and shock what happened? Did one find oneself standing beside the Thing and looking down at it? It would not be a good thing to stand and look down on--even for that which had deserted it. But having torn oneself loose from it and its devilish aches and pains, one would not care--one would see how little it all mattered. Anything else must be better than this--the thing for which there was a scientific name but no healing. He had taken all the drugs, he had obeyed all the medical orders, and here he was after that last hell of a night--dressing himself in a back bedroom of a cheap lodging-house to go out and buy a pistol in this damned fog.

He laughed at the last phrase of his thought, the laugh which was a mirthless grin.

"I am thinking of it as if I was afraid of taking cold," he said. "And to-morrow--!"

There would be no To-morrow. To-morrows were at an end. No more nights--no more days--no more morrows.

He finished dressing, putting on his discriminatingly chosen shabby-genteel clothes with a care for the effect he intended them to

produce. The collar and cuffs of his shirt were frayed and yellow, and he fastened his collar with a pin and tied his worn necktie carelessly. His overcoat was beginning to wear a greenish shade and look threadbare, so was his hat. When his toilet was complete he looked at himself in the cracked and hazy glass, bending forward to scrutinize his unshaven face under the shadow of the dingy hat.

"It is all right," he muttered. "It is not far to the pawnshop where I saw it."

The stillness of the room as he turned to go out was uncanny. As it was a back room, there was no street below from which could arise sounds of passing vehicles, and the thickness of the fog muffled such sound as might have floated from the front. He stopped half-way to the door, not knowing why, and listened. To what--for what? The silence seemed to spread through all the house--out into the streets--through all London--through all the world, and he to stand in the midst of it, a man on the way to Death--with no To-morrow.

What did it mean? It seemed to mean something. The world withdrawn--life withdrawn--sound withdrawn--breath withdrawn. He stood and waited. Perhaps this was one of the symptoms of the morbid thing for which there was that name. If so he had better get away quickly and have it over, lest he be found wandering about not knowing--not knowing. But now he knew--the Silence. He waited--waited and tried to hear, as if something was calling him--calling without sound. It returned to him--

the thought of That which had waited through all the ages to see what he--one man--would do. He had never exactly pitied himself before--he did not know that he pitied himself now, but he was a man going to his death, and a light, cold sweat broke out on him and it seemed as if it was not he who did it, but some other--he flung out his arms and cried aloud words he had not known he was going to speak.

"Lord! Lord! What shall I do to be saved?"

But the Silence gave no answer. It was the Silence still.

And after standing a few moments panting, his arms fell and his head dropped, and turning the handle of the door, he went out to buy the pistol.