
Opening Extract from...

Habits of the House

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The House Awakes

6.58 a.m. Tuesday, 24th October 1899

In late October of the year 1899 a tall, thin, nervy young man ran up the broad stone steps that led to No. 17 Belgrave Square. He seemed agitated. He was without hat or cane, breathless, unattended by staff of any kind, wore office dress – other than that his waistcoat was bright yellow above smart striped stove-pipe trousers – and his moustache had lost its curl in the damp air of the early morning. He seemed both too well-dressed for the tradesman's entrance at the back of the house, yet not quite fit to mount the front steps, leave alone at a run, and especially at such an early hour.

The grand front doors of Belgrave Square belonged to ministers of the Crown, ambassadors of foreign countries, and a sprinkling of titled families. By seven in the morning the back doors would be busy enough with deliveries and the coming and going of kitchen and stable staff, but few approached the great front doors before ten, let alone on foot, informally and without appointment. The visitor pulled the bell handle too long and too hard, and worse, again and again.

The jangling of the bell disturbed the household, waking the gentry, startling such servants who were already up but still sleepy, and disconcerting the upper servants, who were not yet properly dressed for front door work.

Grace, her Ladyship's maid, peered out from her attic window to see what was going on. She used a mirror contraption rigged up for her by Reginald the footman, the better to keep an eye on comings and goings on the steps below. Seeing that it was only Eric Baum, his Lordship's new financial advisor and lawyer, Grace decided it was scarcely her business to answer the door. She saw to her Ladyship's comfort and no one else's. Baum was too young, too excitable and too foreign-looking to be worthy of much exertion, and her Ladyship had been none too pleased when her husband had moved their business affairs into new hands.

Grace continued dressing at her leisure: plain, serviceable, black twill dress – a heavy weave, but it was cold up here in the unheated attics – white newly laundered apron, and a pleated white cap under which she coiled her long fair hair. She liked this simple severity of appearance: she felt it suited her, just as the Countess of Dilberne's colourful silks and satins suited her. Her Ladyship would not need to be woken until nine. Meanwhile Grace would not waste time and energy running up and down stairs to open the front door to the likes of Mr Baum. A sensible man would have gone round to the servants' entrance.

'Bugger!' said Elsie the under housemaid, so startled by the unexpected noise that she spilled most of a pan of ash on to the polished marquetry floor. She was cleaning the grate in the upstairs breakfast room. Grey powder puffed everywhere, clouding a dozen mahogany surfaces. More dusting. She was short of time as it was. She had yet to set the coals, and the wind being from the north the fire would not draw well and likely as not smoke the room out.

This was the trouble with the new London houses – the Grosvenor estate architects, famous as they might be, seemed

to have no idea as to where a chimney should best be placed. At Dilberne Court down in the Hampshire hills, built for the first Earl of Dilberne in the reign of Henry VIII, the chimneys always drew. No. 17 Belgrave Square was a mere rental, albeit on a five-year lease. The servants felt this was not quite the thing; most of the best families liked to own and not rent. But the best families were also the landed families; and land was no longer necessarily the source of wealth that it had always been since the Norman Conquest.

Elsie, along with the majority of the domestic staff, lamented the annual migration to London for the Season, but could see its necessity. The Dilberne children needed to be married off; they were too troublesome single. The young Viscount, Arthur, needed a wife to grow him up, and to give him the children he needed for the succession to the Dilberne title and estates: he was nearing twenty-six, so at least had some time to spare. Rosina, at twenty-eight, most certainly did not. The urgency was greater since she was no beauty and had recently declared herself to be a New Woman and resolved never to marry. London was the place for them to be, but the Season ended in August and here they all still were in October. The change in routine unsettled everyone.

Everyone knew Lady Isobel much preferred giving balls and dinner parties in town to hosting weekends in the country. The rumour also was she hated hunting, being afraid of horses – though otherwise fearless – and was out of sympathy with the male passion for shooting birds. This year the shoots had been let out to neighbouring estates. And also his Lordship had found himself obliged to spend more time in the House of Lords since the trouble in South Africa had flared up. Apparently he had business interests in the area. Neither Mr Neville the butler, nor Reginald the footman had discovered

quite what these were: short of steaming open letters when they arrived (which Reginald wanted to do but Mr Neville forbade, for in his view reading letters left around was legitimate, steaming was not) there was no way of finding out. Mr Baum the lawyer carried documents away with him, or his Lordship locked them safely in the safe. And Elsie had overheard his Lordship say to her Ladyship that he could not forever be travelling up and down from Hampshire to attend the House, so they would stay in London until the New Year.

Elsie, personally, thought the smart new gambling dens in Mayfair and the company of his new friend the Prince of Wales was probably a greater attraction for his Lordship than politics. Elsie had been with the family for some fifteen years and knew as well as any what went on.

'Three monkeys, three monkeys!' Mrs Neville would urge – 'hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil' – in an attempt to tamp down the servants' hall gossip, though in fact she was as bad a culprit as anyone. And Grace, her ladyship's personal maid, would point out that since upstairs saw so little need to preserve their privacy in front of the servants, any more than they did in front of their dogs, they hardly deserved any. All wished Grace would not say this kind of thing; it smacked of disloyalty and the servant's hall, no matter how much it grumbled and complained, knew that by and large it was well off, and happy enough.

Elsie was not prepared to open the front door, no matter how hard and repeatedly the caller pulled the bell: there was smut on her face and she was not yet in her cap and apron. Anyway it was Smithers' job. Elsie would wait for a direct instruction from someone higher in the hierarchy. This overlong stay in London meant she missed her sweetheart. Alan was a gamekeeper on the Dilberne estate; they were

saving to be married. The sooner that happened the better if she was ever to have children. On the yearly trips to London, as it was, Alan, back in Hampshire, consoled himself with drink and frittered the money away. By the New Year there would be precious little left. Elsie was not in a good temper these days, and she was tired of working in a cloud of ash.

There were few cabs about at this early hour, and since receiving the morning telegrams from Natal, Baum had taken a bus, but half-walked, half-run much of the way between Lincoln's Inn Fields where Courtney and Baum had their offices, and the Square. He did not grudge the effort, since on the whole he wished the Earl of Dilberne well, and had certainly lent him enough money in the past to want the debt repaid, and the sooner his Lordship's affairs were in order the sooner that would happen. But while Eric Baum pulled and pulled the bell and no one came, he began to feel aggrieved.

A Certain Slackness

7.10 a.m. Tuesday, 24th October 1899

Isobel, Countess of Dilberne, stirring in her cosy bed, was woken by the repeated jangling of the bell. One of the servants must have left ajar the green baize door which sealed the kitchen areas from the rest of the house, so the racket could be heard all over the house. It was too bad: they were getting slack: something must be done. London demoralized them; they were essentially country folk, accustomed to traditional ways: the city was awash with anarchists and revolutionaries, whose ideas could be infectious. At least her daughter Rosina, so far, confined her radicalism to the rights of women – and who could not be in sympathy? – but if you challenged one aspect of the established order you were all too likely to doubt them all. On the other hand, what decent and propertied young man from the shires would want to marry so headstrong and emancipated a young woman as Rosina? She was more likely to meet her match in London. The oh-so-amusing tale of how the sheer force of Rosina's intellect had exasperated her choleric grandfather to death had got round rural society to the great detriment of her chances as a blushing bride. As for Arthur, he was certainly in more moral peril in London than in Hampshire, the city being awash with bright young women with new ideas and no background, but so far as she could see he was more interested in engines than in girls.

But Robert, irritated into action by the jangling of the bell, was now getting out of bed, letting cold October air in under the blankets, bringing the agreeable wandering of her thoughts to an abrupt end. She would rest more peacefully if Robert slept in his dressing room, but he said he liked the feel of his arms around her in the morning and as often as not spent the night in her bed. Now, as he gently covered her again with blankets, she decided that his continuing affection was more important to her well-being than the unbroken slumber and wandering thoughts of those who slept alone.

'It's not your place to answer the front door,' she said. 'The servants won't like it if you do.'

'It must be some emergency,' said Robert. 'Bad news comes by night.'

'It isn't night,' she said, 'it's dawn.'

'Too near the night for comfort,' he said, but she sat upright to urge him to be more like Sir Francis Drake and finish his game of bowls before setting off to defeat the Spanish Armada, or like the Duke of Wellington finish his dinner before engaging with Bonaparte at Waterloo: so he delayed to admire her breasts, and that done, to embrace her.

His Lordship had great faith in his wife's wisdom. The blood of a successful, if not aristocratic, man ran in her veins. For her father was Silas Batey, who had made his fortune in the sixties in the Newcastle coalfields. If Dilberne had married her to spite his brothers, who had married with more propriety into landed families, which at the time she had rather assumed was the case – he had come to love and value her most dearly.

She considered this good fortune as his shape rose and fell above her: decent women kept their eyes closed, but that, she imagined, was because they were lacking in passion. He was a tall broad-shouldered man with crinkly, still plentiful fair

hair, and the strong jaw and sharp nose which was reckoned to be a mark of venerable French and Viking, Norman descent. In truth his nobility arose a good six centuries later. The original Earl – Hugh Hedleigh, Master Draper and Alderman of the City of London – being a commoner who had risen in power and influence to be ennobled by Henry VIII as the first Earl of Dilberne. Isobel, as it happened, was far more of a Viking than he. She came from Newcastle in the north-east, where the early violent migrations had been from Norway: she also was fair and pale, with wide-apart blue eyes and silky hair: less wily than her husband but quicker to act, and perhaps more principled.

In the meanwhile, ignored, Mr Baum waited on the step. He began to feel it was no coincidence that he was made to wait. As so often in this heathen land of ignoramuses, his race and religion told against him. The wealthy looked down their short, sharp noses and were happy enough to take advice and borrow money – though always reluctant to repay it – while feeling free to despise him for not being one of them. Thank God he was not. He stopped manhandling the bell-pull and sat upon the step, although it was cold and wet upon his behind, and contemplated his wrongs.

A Certain Reluctance

7.20 a.m. Tuesday, 24th October 1899

Mrs Neville the housekeeper assumed Grace or Elsie would be on their way to the door. She herself could hardly be expected to attend to it; the wares of dairyman, fishmonger, butcher and baker all seemed to be arriving at once at the trade entrance for the big dinner that evening. Everything must go perfectly. The Nevilles, butler and housekeeper, with forty years in service behind them, including some ducal experience, also fretted at their employer's decision to stay on in London through the autumn. Life was more tranquil at Dilberne Court: they were in their fifties and had seen the job as semi-retirement. In the country the home farm provided most of the food, and the number of staff, mostly live-in and all loyal, was sufficient to make sure the household ran smoothly.

Here in Belgrave Square, accommodation was more cramped than it ought to be: only a handful of regular staff could live in. Agency staff had to be taken on, and Londoners were known to be a light-fingered lot, so that Mr Neville must forever be checking for missing provisions, cutlery, linen, wine and what have you. This morning though he was nowhere to be seen. Mrs Neville had ordered that he was not to be roused – he had not got to bed until past two because of his Lordship's late arrival home the previous night, and this night's big dinner would go on until the early hours. Mr

Neville suffered from pains in the chest and Mrs Neville worried for him.

'He's fifty-three,' she'd say. 'A man can expect to live to fifty and a woman to fifty-seven. Now if only it suited the Good Lord to take three years off my lifespan and add it to Mr Neville's, we could both go at fifty-four and be in paradise together without inconvenient delay.' Grace, who was good at figures, faulted Mrs Neville's arithmetic, but reckoned it all kept the older woman from brooding and grieving, so kept quiet.

In Mr Neville's absence Reginald was in charge. He was a Dilberne Court man, and acted there as head footman. Here in London his duties were more numerous. He also drove the family cabriolet as required. Horse and carriage were kept in the mews at the back of Belgrave Square. Viscount Arthur liked to drive himself, and sometimes Miss Rosina would insist on taking the reins, though her mother felt it scarcely meet and right so to do. Reginald was a handsome, lively young man of quick, if sometimes rash decision. He was well-liked, frequently reprimanded and frequently forgiven. His unfortunate, rash, decision this morning was to ignore the caller at the front door. In his opinion Elsie was too dirty from the grates to be sent; Grace too grand to be asked. Cook was still in bed and Smithers the parlour maid in her absence already seeing to the staff breakfast. Reginald was hungry and did not want his morning meal delayed. He solved the problem at source by shoving a crust of bread between the bell and its electric wire to deaden the sound should it happen again.

'Some street urchin, who'd best be whipped,' said Reginald. 'Ignore it.'

'But it could be anyone,' said Smithers from the stove. 'Perhaps it's the Prince of Wales calling by for his Lordship,'

she said now, 'with tales of what he was up to last night. Best answer it, or it will end in tears.' Smithers knew better than to joke about the Prince of Wales were Mr or Mrs Neville in the room, but she was alone with Reginald who had an agreeably ribald approach to the amorous lives of the nobs. Smithers, at thirty-six, a stout country lass with a double chin and bright small eyes, had long since given up any hope of marriage, but like so many of the female staff was happy enough to have the society of Reginald in their lives, as a source of shock, awe and adoration. Smithers was gathering ingredients together, leftovers from last night's upstairs table to cook up as good a staff breakfast as she could. She was more generous when it came to cooking food than Mrs Welsh, but took more time about it. She planned to use beef fat to fry up last night's bread rolls, chopped, with patties made from leftover chicken stuffing. The chicken itself was mostly gone. Arthur had a good appetite. The servants' breakfast was never separately catered for, but left to their devices to make an adequate meal, to be served whenever time allowed. At Dilberne Court the routine was more set: in London the unexpected happened, even if only a doorbell ringing out of turn.

It was for Reginald's sake that Smithers now added bacon to the fry-up. The flitch had been brought up from Dilberne Court where it had been cured in the Hampshire way, with sea salt. London bacon was cured with common salt, too little sugar, and too much saltpetre, thus hastening and cheapening the process, but souring the result. In more frugal households the staff would have been fed London bacon, mean yellow stuff which would have to have the sulphur scraped off it before broiling. But it was her Ladyship's policy, though others thought it most extravagant, to allow her staff the luxury of eating much the same food as the family, although not

necessarily, as could be seen from today's breakfast, freshly cooked. Loyalty, as Lady Isobel was well aware in these troubled times of servant shortages, had to be earned, and could not just be expected. The smell tantalized Reginald, who had once told Smithers that when she was cooking bacon she looked almost attractive enough to marry. She had day-dreamed sometimes since that this might possibly happen, but realized the folly of such hope. Reginald had a taste for bad girls, everyone knew, and Smithers simply did not have the looks.

'Dirty Bertie,' said Reginald, 'and don't let your betters hear you calling him that, has a wife to go back to whom they say he tells all, and quite enjoys the telling. He won't be knocking on our door.' Since the Princess Alexandra was known to have struck up a friendship with one the of the Prince's mistresses, the rumour had arisen. 'Telling' was a misnomer since the poor woman was stone deaf. But that did not stop the rumour. 'If they're so desperate, whoever it is can come round the back.'

The Earl Opens the Door

7.35 a.m. Tuesday, 24th October 1899

So it was his Lordship himself who eventually unlocked and opened the double doors of No. 17 to an ill-tempered Mr Baum; the bell had by now stopped ringing and Baum sat bad-tempered and cold-bottomed on the step. His Lordship found the doors surprisingly heavy and realized, startling himself, that he had never before actually answered his own front door. He wondered if paying others to do so made him less or more of a man. Less, in his own eyes, he supposed; more, in the eyes of the world. Less, because fate had landed him in this situation; it was not merit but circumstance of birth had led him to this pass; more because the world presumed his energy was so important it had to be reserved for more important things than opening doors. Worse, Reginald would make light work of the task, being a well set up young man, but even the maids seemed to have no trouble. He was growing old. It was alarming how the awareness struck him with increasing frequency. Mind you, bloody Gladstone had lived until ninety, working mischief and scribbling to the end. But on the other hand, Robert's fellow Tories felt confident that if the Liberals finally brought in a Pensions Bill for the impoverished and very old – those over the age of seventy – few would live to collect it.

He the Earl was not immortal. His son Arthur must get going, get married, provide an heir to the estate. Otherwise,

on his death his own younger brother would collect the title – and the estate debts, of course, which were plentiful. These days vast estates meant vast debts rather than vast wealth – and poor Isobel, if she lived so long, would be ousted even from the dower house, which was in a shocking state of repair as it was, which would not suit her at all. A pity Arthur had so little interest in political affairs, and Rosina so much.

By the time the door was finally opened to Mr Baum his Lordship was so preoccupied by his own thoughts that it was moments before he recognized the fellow sitting on the steps.

'Good God,' he said, seeing Baum. 'You! Why?' It was scarcely a genial greeting, and Eric Baum thought he deserved better.

Baum stood up slowly, and winced from a stiffness in his legs. He had, he explained, some urgent news from South Africa which he thought should be imparted to his Lordship before he set off for the House.

'In my experience, news that is urgent is seldom of permanent interest,' said his Lordship with a detached smile and the polite charm of the old Etonian who is actually delivering an insult, but one that only his own kind will recognize. 'However, dear fellow, since you're here – you'd better come in and tell me all about it.'

Robert courteously stepped aside to allow Baum to enter. He noted that Baum was wearing a bright yellow waistcoat with a stiff high collar, in the current fashion amongst some young men, apparently aping that of those who lived in God's Own Country. Which was how the English sardonically enjoyed referring to the Americans and their vulgar, money-grubbing, noisy, self-affirming ways. His Lordship wondered quite how it was that he had ended up with a financial counsellor so attuned to the worst of contemporary taste.

Once lawyers and professional men of all kinds had been predictably old, grey and cautious. No longer.

Baum repeated that, in his opinion, time was of the essence, and more that since his news affected the finances of the whole family, the Countess should perhaps be present at an immediate meeting, and the children too – they both being well into their majority and having so much of their wealth now invested in Natal. His eyes seemed to dart about uneasily, as a man's might when he has something to hide.

His Lordship was mildly disturbed by his lawyer's presumption, but since he was currently in debt to the fellow to the tune of some thirty thousand pounds, merely pointed out that her Ladyship normally breakfasted in bed and since neither of the children was a trustee of their trust funds, and he was, there was no necessity at all for their presence. And surely it was seemly that business matters waited until later in the day?

'Stay to breakfast, my good man, stay to breakfast,' he said genially, and at least did not suggest, though the temptation arose, that Baum might prefer to go round to the trade entrance and have breakfast in the servants' hall, where no doubt at this time of the morning it was available. He remembered in time that it was the Prince's friend and financial advisor Ernest Cassel – recently made a Knight of the Grand Cross – who had recommended Mr Baum to Robert as a shrewd and reliable financial counsellor and solicitor, with a background in mining and a good grasp of current commercial and financial matters. A good choice to manage the Dilberne financial estate, which in his Lordship's own description was in 'rather a jolly mess'.

But then Cassel knew well enough how to conduct himself as a gentleman, whereas Baum had just evidenced that he did

not. Gentlemen wore their hats when out and about, were smartly attired, did not wear ridiculous fashions, or run through the streets in a panic to disturb other people's slumber, and then sit gloomily upon their damp front steps.

Cassel was urbane and self-deprecating. 'When I was young,' he'd said to his Lordship, 'people called me a gambler. As soon as the scale of my operations increased they called me a speculator. Now I am called a banker. But I have been doing the same thing all the time. You need someone reliable with an eye for detail, like young Eric Baum.'

But now Baum's preoccupation with detail was running out of control. He seemed unable to stop babbling: her Ladyship had a good head on her shoulders and needed to be involved; the children needed to stop running up debts, Master Arthur's tailor's bills were now a matter of real concern with Mr Skinner from Savile Row contemplating legal action, and Miss Rosina had written a cheque to the Women's Suffrage Movement, which Mr Baum was sorely tempted to deny. Suffrage would do women no good, they would all simply end up as work drudges, and men feeling no responsibility at all for their welfare, but to what degree was Mr Baum to use his own discretion in such matters? The bills came in to him and if he did nothing, nothing was resolved.

'And these are the least of my worries,' said Mr Baum, 'I regret to say. What I have to tell you concerns all the immediate members of your family. All being signatories, all must hear it in person, in case of any future dispute. It is of great significance to all of them.' Robert frowned; he was no more used to being told what to do than he was to opening his own front door. 'Your Lordship …' he heard Baum's voice as though from far off.

He sighed. The debtor, it seemed, must not only be servant to the lender, but give the lender his attention. There was to be

no escape. He rang for Mrs Neville, who summoned Grace, who roused Lady Isobel and the children with the advice that they were expected down to breakfast with his Lordship and Mr Baum at nine o'clock. In the kitchens Smithers complained and abandoned the staff breakfast. Elsie, who had at least managed to have the morning room fire burning brightly, ran to bring Cook down from her attic to help achieve a formal upstairs breakfast for five including a guest, one hour earlier than normal. In the meanwhile his Lordship left Baum to cool his heels in the library and went out to the mews to check that Agripin was getting the treatment he deserved.

The horse was a promising four-year-old bay Robert had recently won in a wager with the Prince of Wales. The Prince could well afford the loss, having backed Cassel's Gadfly for a win in her maiden race, to the tune of five hundred pounds at seventeen to one. That win had been at the October meet in Newmarket. There had been eighteen in the field. The Prince liked to win at racing just as he liked to win at cards. It cheered him up. Agripin would need to be farmed out to Roseberry's estate in Epsom for John Huggins to train, an expense Robert had not reckoned on at the time of the wager, but it was surely a good investment. You only had to look at the creature to tell he would eventually make someone a fortune, and at this particular time it would be just as well that he was that person, and that it should happen rather quickly.

The only reason he had transferred most of his, and Isobel's, wealth – and indeed what was left of the children's nest eggs – into the gold mine in Natal was that the seam was nearer the surface and a great deal quicker and easier to bring the ore to the surface than the diamonds in which so many of his landed friends and colleagues had invested. He hoped, rather against hope, that the news Baum brought was not to

do with yet more trouble from the wretched Dutch Boers. The Modder Kloof mine was a few score miles to the south of Ladysmith, but so great was the British military superiority in arms and numbers the place had seemed safe enough. More, the Boer treatment of the natives was so appalling that loyalty from workers could surely be expected in the many British enterprises springing up in the area, providing employment, wealth and culture to a benighted land. Mind you, he supposed, that was probably the same assumption made by the Romans until they found the Iceni under Boadicea sacking Colchester and Londinium in 60 AD. What, after so much we have done for them – roads, rule of law, wealth, trading opportunities – still yet they can hate us?