

THE SHORN LAMB

CHAPTER I

BROTHERTON DRAKE sat on the bed in the little hôtel bedroom, threw his hat on the battered suit-case which the Boots as man-of-all-work had put on a chair, and stared about him, wondering what he should do next. It was a frowzy bedroom, ill-lit and unventilated; the wall-paper was stained, the strip of drugget threadbare, the cotton bed coverlet unclean; and through the small window nothing could be seen but the murk and smoke of a sullen London sky. From outside mounted the unceasing clatter of the street, dominated now and then by the thunder of a train across Waterloo railway bridge. The room smelled of newly fried fish and ancient perspiration. Brotherton Drake shrugged his shoulders and smiled ironically. What could you expect for three and sixpence? With breakfast. He had given up expecting much for a long time.

At any rate, such air as there was he would have, in spite of the cold. He threw up the rickety sash, and South London screamed and roared at him, not in welcome, but in derision. Did he think London would be outdone by New York in clamorous rejection of the unfit? If so, he was vastly mistaken. The Waterloo Bridge Road and York Road and their purlieus would soon teach him that New York was

not the sole agent for the Furies in this underworld.

Perhaps it was the all-enveloping sour smell that most offended him. For the last eight days he had breathed the pure Atlantic air, only descending to stuffy, third-class depths for food and sleep. He had landed at Southampton a few hours before, and, trudging with his suit-case from Waterloo Station, had just taken up his quarters at this unsavoury hotel: Private Hotel, with a card in the fanlight over the door announcing, "Bed and Breakfast 3/6."

The friend on board who had recommended it had said:

"I'd go there with you, Buddy, dear boy, if I hadn't to make Birmingham to-night. It isn't the Ritz, but the people are honest. I know them. Mention my name and all will be well."

He had flung a histrionic hand. Buddy Drake had envied him. He was coming home with a definite purpose. A definite engagement in a Birmingham production awaited him. His farewell at the station had been patronizing:

"If London won't have you, Buddy, dear boy, Birmingham will. Don Carey will see to that."

But whatever momentary hopes Buddy had founded on Don Carey vanished when he learned that his name was no password even to this dingy lodging-house, for it was entirely unknown.

Buddy sat down again on the bed and emptied his pockets. He had still a gold watch and chain—the watch given him many years ago by his father whom he held in humorous memory, the chain a gift from his wife, dead ten long years ago. He counted out his money: six pounds eight shillings and sevenpence. This, the watch and chain, the clothes he wore, the old suit-case and its inconsiderable contents comprised

the whole fortune, estate real and personal, of Brotherton Drake, son of Sir Michael Drake, Baronet, bred in the traditions of Winchester and King's College, Cambridge.

He passed his hand over his hair. It was light brown, thinning at the top. "Six pounds eight and seven divided by three and six. Oh, hell, I can't do it. What does it matter?"

He laughed. Caught up his hat. He would go down and get a drink. The thought coincided with the restoring of the gold watch to his pocket. The old man's watch. On such a turn of Fortune's wheel, the old man would have come to the same decision. He heard the jovial echo from the past:

"Why worry, my boy? Let's have a drink."

He descended the stairs to an evil-smelling and deserted den, labelled "Smoking-Room." The Boots, lounging round the entry, took his order for a whisky and soda. For once, he thought, he would have a drink in beautiful freedom. He laughed at the sudden thought of the matter-of-course liberty of an Englishman in England. Until that moment of his first drink in London, his Americanized sub-consciousness had not realized the astounding fact. You said to any myrmidon in any hostelry, "Bring me champagne, bring me brandy, bring me gin, bring me vodka, bring me Burgundy, bring me any damn kind of alcoholic liquor you've got," and there it was, of the best, set before you in public; and you drank it in public. And at public banquets the stentorian-voiced toastmaster behind the chair proclaimed openly:

"Mr. Chairman, My Lords and Gentlemen, I pray you charge your glasses. The Toast is—The King."

And you sipped from glasses full of champagne that was real, free, laughing, bubbling. . . .

"Half the soda."

There it was, free, laughing, bubbling, sizzling. After all, perhaps it was worth while coming back to the old country.

Buddy Drake smacked his lips. Yes. It was different from the bootleg stuff of America. It had a mellow tang. It reminded him of old times. He had told the Boots to give him half the soda. He had instinctively obeyed the dictum of the old man—"My boy, when you see a fellow take half an inch of soda to his whisky, you may know that he's a drunkard. When he has his glass filled to the brim, you may know he's just a mere thirsty ass. The mean, as the Buddhists say, is the way of wisdom."

Poor dear old man! He had gone to God soon after Buddy had cast off Cambridge and all its works and gone into the War. Buddy looked at his watch. A quarter to six. It was a beast of a smoking-room, dismal and smelly, about nine feet by seven, with half a dozen cracked leather chairs, and a sulky fire glowering from an old-fashioned grate.

Anyhow, it was England again. England which he hadn't seen for eleven years. He was now thirty-six. He sipped his whisky and soda, a free man's drink in a free country. . . . Six pounds eight shillings and sevenpence! What kind of a damn fool had he been?

Was it the old man's fault? Who could tell? Who was he, of all men, to judge the dead? Anyhow, in the time past, he had been nearer to his father than his brother Atherton, the present holder of the title, Atherton, his twin brother, who had preceded him into the world.

The dear old man, rubicund, jolly, fox-hunting—woman-hunting, if it were permitted to say so—had heralded his advent into the world with a joke. His

mother, a colourless woman with a pride in ancestry, had decided that the coming child, if a boy, should be called Atherton. When another boy followed soon in the wake of the first, complications arose. The elder, naturally, was Atherton. But the younger, the perhaps unwanted, brother?

"Why, Brotherton, of course," said the jesting father.

"A very good name," said the lady. "There are some Shropshire Brothertons, I believe. A very old family."

Well, one name, in Sir Michael's opinion, was as good as another. To point out to his unhumorous wife that he had spoken flippantly would have been open offence, such as he could not dream of committing. His many offences against her he had kept most scrupulously covert.

It was an American friend who had given him his almost lifelong diminutive.

"What's this one's name, Michael?"

"Brotherton."

"Brotherton, hell. Come here, Buddy."

His mother's ears had never been shocked by the vulgar appellation. At the time—he was four years old—she was ailing. A few days later she was dead. His memories of her were vague. He retained an impression of a Pale Righteousness from whom he would fly to the never-failing glow of Unregeneracy that was his father.

Buddy Drake finished his whisky and ordered another. The old man would have done just the same. He laughed. Why was he thinking of all these things? The old man had been in his grave for many years. If he couldn't laugh he must weep a good deal. And of late years he had had enough to weep over. God! What a mess he had made of life!

There are men who make a mess of their lives with a whimsical deliberation. By an act of volition they shut their eyes and leap blindly into the Unknown, certain of thrill and sanguine of success. When they fall on their feet they are accounted heroes; when they break their necks the world regards them as mere and common fools. Buddy had never yet succeeded in breaking his neck, but he had suffered dislocations enough to qualify him for the latter category. When his father died he came into twenty thousand pounds, half the estate, for the twins shared equally under the will. What became of the money Buddy scarcely knew. With some of it he had a gaudy time for a couple of years or so. Some he gave away. There was Molly Desart and her two babies, for instance, with nothing but the pension of a captain's widow to live on. Billy Desart, who had been through tight places with him in the War and had been killed by his side, was his ideal of a soldier and a gentleman, a King of Men; and Molly, a V.A.D. nurse, with no visible means of support, was a dear. He had been best man at their war-wedding. Well, if a man wallowing in money couldn't set up a comrade's widow in the hat business, what was the good of him? And there were others whom he had helped. Then, some fool had urged him to gamble in foreign exchanges. At one period he was a multi-millionaire in Austrian kronen. A short while afterwards he found himself a pauper.

"If only you had taken my advice," said his wise brother, Atherton, "and followed my investments, you'd have doubled your capital. Why will you always play the fool?"

That was the history of the twin brothers. Atherton was wise, Brotherton foolish. Atherton left Eton with an open scholarship at Trinity, and spouted his Latin Prize Poem at Commem, with the air of one in

whom brilliant correctitude is but a normal quality. How Buddy managed to hang on half after half at the school was a miracle to his father, his brother, and himself. He afterwards realized that the Dark Powers in white ties were kindly souls not devoid of humour. In the middle of his inglorious Cambridge career the War broke out. He went to war. Atherton, a delicate youth with a weak heart, to whom violent physical exertion had always been forbidden, remained at home. While Buddy floundered in blood and mud, cursing the War, but secretly loving it, Atherton took a brilliant degree and walked straight into high politics as private secretary to a Minister. If the War had continued indefinitely he would have reached high office. As it was, he slipped into Parliament at a by-election and was given ministerial rank. Buddy came out of the War with an M.C. and a bullet through his body. Atherton used his twenty thousand pounds so shrewdly that, when Buddy came to him with his distressful story, he had already doubled his capital.

"If you had taken my advice . . ." he said.

It was then that Buddy, scornful of advice, took from his brother something far more important.

He took away his bride; bolted away with her on the night before the wedding, like Young Lochinvar.

Her name was Mona. She was adorable. Buddy adored her, but, honest soul, he had never told his love. What chance had he, obscure and almost penniless, against his brother, with his title, his distinction, his brilliant prospects? Not a dog's chance. But what happened?

A July night. A stuffy family party. A moonlit terrace, lawns and pale flowers and scents and still air and far-off, silent, and companionable elms. The two together for a breathing space; and nothing on the surface of his mind but the giving of a brotherly,

though wistful, benediction. And, gradually, the intent of their words, at first so innocent, grew in trembling significance, until, to his amazement, she broke out, in the bitter modern way:

"I'll stick it out with Atherton all right. But why wasn't it you?"

And the moon laughed and the stars danced and the elms swayed, and the summer night went reeling mad and the girl was in Buddy's arms.

"An hour afterwards they were speeding away in Buddy's car, through Surrey lanes to London." A fortnight later they were in New York seeking their fortune.

Then six months of wild and wonderful rapture, and she was dead. The New York winter, a chance-caught cold, pneumonia—that was all the pitiful history.

That was ten years ago; and those ten years had been marked by nothing but disillusion and disappointments attendant on innumerable acts of lunacy.

Buddy was an instinctive actor. In the nursery, at school, at the University, in the Army (when behind the lines the weary would be at rest), his little talent had been his one claim to distinction. So, in New York, he went on the stage; and on the stage he remained during the unprofitable years. He travelled the length and breadth of the United States, playing all sorts of parts in all sorts of companies. He had even played Legree in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Hollywood gave him a chance of fortune. He threw it away, and joined an old fellow-actor, last met some years before in Springfield, Ohio, in an illusory bootlegging business. His small savings were swallowed up; his car, full of dreadful liquor, was stopped by the police who kindly bade him clear out of Los Angeles

County as speedily as he could, while his unscathed friend and partner laughed sarcastically and lent him his fare to San Francisco.

That was the beginning of the end. At last New York again ; weary waiting among the drab and wistful crowd in agents' anterooms ; dreadful walking on Broadway till the soles of his shoes wore through.

He had the creased and crackled and hateful things on his feet now, as he sat by the dismal fire drinking his extravagant whisky and soda.

Presently he rose, straightened his worn tie in front of the once gilt-framed mirror over the mantelpiece, pulled his old jacket out of its folds, with the instinct of a man careful of personal appearance, and went out of the room in search of the telephone. He found it in a dark corner. After consulting a page in his pocket-book he put the necessary twopence in the slot and called a number.

A voice responded, " Hello."

" Is that Park 9857 ? "

" Yes, Sir Atherton. Bronson speaking."

Buddy gasped. He knew that he resembled his twin brother in looks, but had never realized a similarity of voice. He said :

" I'm not Sir Atherton, but his brother, Mr. Brotherton Drake. Is Sir Atherton in ? "

" No, sir. He's just gone out to dine at the Club."

" What Club ? "

" The Athenæum, sir."

" Oh ! " said Buddy. No institution less illustrious than the Athenæum would do for Atherton. He went on, " What time do you think he'd be at home ? "

" Before nine, sir," said the man's voice in a tone of conviction. " Sir Atherton's not been very well lately and has to keep early hours."

"Will you tell him then," said Buddy, "that I'll come along a little after nine."

"It's Mrs. Bronson's and my night out, sir, and we'll have gone before he comes in. But if you ring him up at the Athenæum——"

"I'll do that," said Buddy. "Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Bronson. . . . Bronson. . . . His mind groped back through the years. Good God! Yes, there had been an efficient young butler called Bronson, at home, in his father's house. Atherton had kept him on, regardful of family traditions.

Buddy went back to his comfortless den and meditated on the imperturbability of English butlers. In spite of a ten-year absence and of family upheavals, Bronson had taken him as though he were his brother's daily visitor. If he had said, "Tell Sir Atherton I'm down and out, starving, in the gutter," Bronson would have replied, "Certainly, sir, I'll tell Sir Atherton."

That, however, was what he himself must tell his brother. It was an unpleasant business. But it couldn't be helped. As his long since defunct friend, Maître François Villon, had remarked, "Hunger drives the wolves abroad."

After all, he wasn't much of a wolf. He had never asked Atherton for a penny in his life. All he wanted was a loan—say of a hundred pounds—to put him on his feet, decently shod feet, for instance, so that he could seek work with some prospect of success. Atherton's reception and manner might not signify enthusiastic welcome. By running off with his bride he had played him as scurvy a trick as one man might play another. But that was a long time ago, and a twin brother is a twin brother; and to a man with a flat in Park Lane and a place in the country and a perfect manservant (probably also a more perfect woman

servant—cook?—in the unknown Mrs. Bronson), a hundred pounds would be the most trivial of sums.

Should he ring up the Athenæum? No. Atherton might ask him to dinner. He took in his shabbiness at a glance. The place would be chock-full of Bishops and Cabinet Ministers. A daw could not consort with such peacocks. Besides, it would be rough on Atherton. The best and kindest of men have their inviolable vanities.

