

CHAPTER X

HE crossed the road, entered the gates and strode up the drive which mounted to a dark, red-brick Queen Anne manor-house. Here were evidences of care and love. The very ivy looked as if it loved the walls. There were well-kept lawns, trimmed yew hedges enclosing probably a rose-garden.

The house had a wide and gracious front. The main entrance, at the side, was equally gracious. The gravelled path looked as though it had been rolled but half an hour before. The steps were of welcoming cleanness. The mat and brush-fitted scraper compelled, with a courteous air of suggestion, the muddy visitor to make his entry with unstained feet.

Buddy rang the bell. The door was opened by a middle-aged man, a class-replica of Bronson. His mouth opened foolishly when he saw Buddy. He gasped :

“ Sir Atherton. . . . ”

“ Yes. It’s me all right. Is Mr. Flower in ? ”

“ Mr. Flower’s in, but begging your pardon, Sir Atherton ”—the man was flustered—“ I don’t quite know—— ”

“ But I know,” said Buddy. “ There has been all sorts of talk about me. You’re afraid if you tell Mr. Flower I’m here he won’t receive me. Well, you needn’t—see ? Where is he ? ”

“ In the study, Sir Atherton.”

"Well, take me to the study, open the door and announce me." He laughed at the man's embarrassed face. "You're afraid again. It's as much as your place is worth, I suppose. Mr. Flower will dismiss you. He won't. There's been a ghastly misunderstanding, my good——" He snapped his fingers and tapped a regretfully forgetful head.

"Smith, Sir Atherton."

"Of course. But I've been so worried. Look here. If you get into any trouble I'll see you through it. Honour bright. But you won't."

Smith, the butler, sighed. He knew that his master disliked Sir Atherton Drake exceedingly, especially since Mrs. Flower had gone off to live her own non-conjugal life in strange places. But, still, who was he to refuse Sir Atherton Drake admittance? A Sir Atherton bearing an explanatory olive-branch in his hand. He hesitated.

"Ten pounds, anyway. And a hundred if you're asked to find a new situation."

Smith's brain began to whirl. This was a Sir Atherton Drake either in masquerade, or a real Sir Atherton whom he had never before appreciated. He yielded.

It was a beautiful house, soft-carpeted, picture-hung, with bits of restful old mahogany furniture in the warm corridor.

Smith threw open a door.

"Sir Atherton Drake, sir."

Buddy had a confused first impression of a comfortable room, a country-bred man's room: sporting prints, a picture or so of a horse, well-stocked bookshelves, piles of magazines on a side table.

The rider of the morning, still in riding kit, glanced up from a writing-table where he sat, examining something through a magnifying-glass—postage stamps,

as Buddy saw later—and then sprang to his feet, magnifying-glass in hand.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

He was a fair, heavily built man, who had evidently kept himself in physical fitness, with crisp hair and blue eyes that blazed anger.

“I’ve come to bring you to your senses,” said Buddy.

Flower exploded, as Buddy expected him to do. It was only natural. Flagrant co-respondents are not received mellifluously by outraged husbands. Buddy, hands on hips, regarded him unemotionally.

“Clear out, I tell you. Damn you, clear out! I don’t want to lay hands on a sick man, but, by God, if you don’t go, I’ll throw you out.”

“Try,” said Buddy.

The infuriated man thrust out an arm. Buddy gripped his wrist with one hand and the other hand gripped beneath the elbow. Flower gave a gasp of pain and his eyes stared in horrified terror.

“Don’t move or your arm’ll be snapped like a stick. I learned this from a Japanese acrobat in Seattle.”

He released his rueful opponent who said, mystified:

“What are you talking about?”

“You haven’t given me a chance to tell you.”

“That’s that beastly jujitsu,” said Flower, rubbing his arm.

“I suppose so. It’s the only trick I learned and it came off, didn’t it?”

Horatio Flower passed his hands over his eyes. Atherton Drake taught jujitsu by a Japanese acrobat in Seattle! He was launched into the phantasmagorical. Buddy pointed a finger.

“You went through the War, didn’t you?”

“You know damn well I did.”

“So you know what this is,” said Buddy, peeling

himself to the knee and disclosing a broad white scar on his calf. "Not a vaccination mark, is it? That's shrapnel, and a bloody nasty bit of shrapnel at that. If you'd like me to take off my shirt I could show you the marks of a machine-gun bullet back and front, right through me. Say the word and I'll strip."

Horatio Flower came forward and looked savagely into his eyes, while Buddy smiled.

"Who the blazes are you? I could swear you're Atherton Drake, but he was never in the War and never went to America—as far as I know. Anyhow, he wasn't the sort of blighter that would learn jujitsu on the Pacific coast. Who are you?"

"That's what I've come to tell you, my dear fellow," said Buddy, "at my own very personal peril. As I said, you won't give me a chance. I happen to be a man with some muddled sense of honour. I saw no way out of a hideously fantastic situation till half an hour ago. First, disabuse your mind of the notion that I'm Atherton Drake."

"Now I see you're not," cried his involuntary and humbled host. "Oh, do sit down."

He drew hasty chairs to the fireside.

"Once more, who are you?"

"Brotherton Drake, Atherton's twin brother."

Flower started forward in his chair.

"You're a fraud. Brotherton Drake died more than a month ago."

"How do you know?"

"His death was announced in *The Times*."

"That's quite so," said Buddy. "I had the announcement put in myself. This is a free country. If a man can't put in a notice of his own death in a newspaper, what can he do?"

"Is that why you didn't introduce yourself here under your own name?"

"Obviously," said Buddy. "May I smoke a cigarette?"

"Sorry," said his host, handing him a box. He lit a cigarette himself. "And what does your brother—Atherton—say about it?"

"I'm afraid it's beyond the wit of man to conjecture," said Buddy gravely. "You see—Atherton's dead."

Flower regarded him in blank incredulity.

"Dead?"

Buddy made a little confirmatory gesture, followed by one claiming attention.

"I told you just now I've come here at my own peril. When you've heard what I've got to say I'll be at your mercy. But I think you'll appreciate my motives, anyhow. I spoke of a difficult situation. Believe me, if I were just a filthy adventurer—oh, I'm, Brotherton Drake all right, seventh baronet and everything—if I hadn't some human feeling left, nothing would have been simpler for me than to go off with plenty of money in banks and pockets, to any old place across the seas, and leave you all planted here to stew in your own juice."

"Us all?" cried Flower.

"You and the charming lady who is your wife."

Again Flower sprang from his chair. He threw his cigarette end into the fire. Buddy rose too.

"What have you to do with my wife?"

"Theoretically everything, but practically, thank God, nothing."

"I wish to Heaven you'd explain what you're talking about."

"It's simple—in a way," said Buddy. "Listen. That announcement in *The Times*. It wasn't Brotherton who died. It was Atherton. Sit down, please. It's a story that'll take some time in telling."

He told him ; began with his abduction of Atherton's betrothed ; sketched his foolish vagabond life in America ; came to his return to England with £6 8s. 7d. for all his fortune ; and then narrated the quick, subsequent events : his visit to Atherton ; Atherton's death ; his crazy impulse to change identities and, in the dead brother's clothes, to step into the dead brother's fortune.

"From the first, you see, I fooled not only the manservant Bronson, but Dr. Selous, the officials at the bank, and Atherton's solicitor. I fooled your man, Smith, and you yourself when I broke into this room."

Flower had sat all the time, elbow on arm of chair and chin in hand, his brows knit, his blue eyes, keen and hard, a trifle crossed. Buddy recalled another man of the same curiously English type, a man whom he loved, a colonel of his battalion in the War, who sat and looked just like that, when bad reports came in, or when he was examining a Boche prisoner. It was mainly the suggestion of cross-eyedness or squint that threw Buddy back to the years of issues of life and death.

"And then?" he asked without moving.

"And then," said Buddy, "I had SOS calls from a lady I had never heard of. In common decency I had to take some notice of them. I went to Paris."

"You went to Paris? You saw her. My wife?"

"What else could I do?"

"Did she take you for Atherton?"

"She did."

Flower stamped about the room, his hands doing silly things with his hair.

"And you didn't tell her who you were?"

"Certainly not."

"You damned scoundrel!"

"Oh, cut that out," cried Buddy angrily. "Talk sense. If I were a damned scoundrel I shouldn't be here. I saw your wife for about ten minutes in a nursing-home, after a ghastly operation."

Flower wheeled round and stood stock-still. He echoed :

"Operation ?"

"That's what I said. A very serious operation. How could I spring the whole of this fairy story on her ? Give me credit for common sense, man. I saw her for a few minutes two or three days ago. Since then she has had some sort of relapse and is dangerously ill."

Flower stood before him with a ghastly face.

"My God !"

"So ill," said Buddy, "that there was no chance of seeing me—the ghost of Atherton—for some days. That's why I came back to London. There were divorce proceedings . . ."

The anguished man waved away such petty considerations.

"Do you mean that Muriel is in danger of her life ?"

Buddy seated himself on a corner of the old oak refectory table at which Flower had been working on his stamp collection.

"I wouldn't go as far as that," said he. "But she's a very sick woman."

"Why did nobody tell me ?" cried Flower.

"I don't know," replied Buddy. "How can I ? I've butted into this complication unawares. I've never struck a hornet's nest, but I fooled about with a wasp's nest when I was a small boy and they had to put me to bed for a week."

Horatio Flower, caring nothing for Buddy's discomfiture, asked :

"Where is she?"

Buddy gave him the address of the nursing-home.

"She has everything, I assure you, that modern science and skill can offer. Her sister, Diana, is with her."

"Diana—so you know Diana, do you?"

His lips twitched for a second in an ironical smile.

"I met her for the first time in Paris. Perhaps I had better fill in things."

Which, feeling for the instant in command of the incredible situation, he proceeded to do. With his gift of the histrionic, Buddy should have established himself as a great actor. He dramatized his first meeting with Diana, their talk, their dinner at Fouquet's, so that the duller yet responsive man, in spite of dreadful preoccupation, stood held in the grip of the narrator.

Then there was a long silence. It was broken by Flower, his hand on the bell-push, asking curtly:

"Have a drink?"

"With great pleasure," said Buddy.

Another silence until the butler answered the summons.

"Whisky or brandy?"

"A brandy and soda, please," said Buddy.

Again a silence until the drinks were brought and the butler had retired.

"Here's luck," said Flower, lifting his glass.

"The same," said Buddy.

Flower set down his glass on a table. His honest fair face sagged in pathetic dubiety.

"What am I to do?" he asked simply.

Buddy's heart leaped within him. Here was a side of the man's character on which he had, now he came to think of it, only subconsciously counted. This honest fellow was still in love with his not too con-

siderable a wife. Muriel was ill, at death's door. That was all that seemed to matter. If only Flower would take Muriel off his hands, all would be gloriously well.

"I should think the first thing to do would be to realize the impossible position in which Mrs. Flower and I are placed with regard to each other."

Flower turned away. "Of course I realize it. It's obvious."

"When I started in on this idiot game I never dreamed that anyone would be hurt by it," said Buddy. "How could I guess—with a man like Atherton? I've got to hurt Mrs. Flower somehow. You see that, don't you? The question is: how can I hurt her least? I'm desperately sorry."

"Why didn't you tell her all this—what you've told me?"

"Don't forget she's very ill. I might have told, Miss Merrow, who would have broken it to her gently. But that would have been rather dangerous. For any good to have come out of it you would have had to be told, in any case. And, once my secret was common property, the Public Prosecutor would step in and rightly accuse me of all sorts of crimes and felonies, and send me to penal servitude for God knows how many years! You see I'm up against it."

Flower gave a short laugh, not very mirthful, and stood, hands on hips, his back to the fire.

"I suppose you are. And, by throwing yourself on my mercy as you call it, you expect me to say nothing about your imposture. In fact, to compound a felony."

"That's exactly what it comes to," said Buddy.

"Suppose I agree, what then?"

Buddy stepped from the corner of the table to his feet.

"You can't in decency bring divorce proceedings

against me—a dummy—with no possible defence, and with only two alternatives after the divorce is granted—in either of which I should be an unutterable swine—either to marry or not to marry the lady.”

An angry flush rose to the other man's face. He gripped his jacket with each hand. Buddy admired him standing there, typically English, outwardly restrained yet inwardly a cauldron of passions and loves and hatreds. A man in whom circumstances had deadened the impulses that differentiate the individual from the type. A man of inherited traditions, fine and noble, instinctively followed. Even the War, with its shattering of human values, had left this solid, English country squire unchanged. The War had merely compelled blind obedience to the sacred and unquestioned traditions that for centuries had been the guiding principles of his race. He had no part in the modern neurotic world.

Buddy said quietly, meeting his eyes :

“ You see you'll have to withdraw these divorce proceedings at once.”

He turned and moved to the window and looked out at the sweep of lawns and the majestic outlines of leafless oak and elm. Far away to the right rose a dim ridge melting into the now leaden sky. A prospect of calm, uninspiring restfulness ; the prospect, thought Buddy, on which this man's spiritual life was based. He himself was of the same country-side ; born and bred not forty miles away. His father was of the same Hampshire type. The rural blood of a grandmother must have worked in him so that he became, perhaps unfortunately, individual. How to account for Atherton ? Well, there was their mother—acidulated essence in a rich and sluggish south-country English blood. He himself ? He had knocked about the world, and the world had knocked him, and cir-

cumstances had killed all the sacred fetishes with the cold laughter of ridicule. Still, he knew their potency. That was why he was looking out of the window, leaving Horatio Flower to deal with them.

His mind worked along bypaths of idle speculation. Why should this splendid fellow be cursed by the bombastic name of Horatio? It was idiotic, un-English, out of their sacred tradition. Then it occurred to him that it was the Christian name of one of the most illustrious of Englishmen—Nelson. He gave it up, as he had given up many problems before.

He heard himself called :

“ Drake ! ”

He turned.

“ What made you think I'd do all this that you ask me ? ”

“ For one thing—the way you rode that beast of a colt ; and for another—— ” He paused.

“ Well ? ”

“ It's very intimate. I think it. I'm sure of it. But till I've your permission I won't say it.”

Flower regarded him with hard eyes and a set face.

“ You can say exactly what you like.”

“ You're madly in love with your wife.”

The other made a little noise in his throat, signifying assent.

“ So that if I fade out of her horizon, which the withdrawal of proceedings will allow me to do—I don't say gracefully, that's where I must have a bad mark against my name, and I don't say without wounding a woman's pride—at any rate you'll have the whole field to yourself for a reconciliation, if you want one, which I think you do.”

“ All right,” said Flower, as if he had been told to command a raid on enemy's trenches in broad daylight.

"Forgive my treading on such delicate ground," said Buddy.

"You had to. Perhaps I'm grateful. I don't know. This sort of thing rather upsets a man. Well, that's that. Let's talk of something else. What are you going to do?"

Buddy replied more or less vaguely, for he had no plans beyond flight from England. He was selling Newstead Park, at any rate.

"I'm glad of that," said Flower.

"Helps a bit, doesn't it?" said Buddy, with his humorous smile.

Flower relaxed into a laugh. After a while he said suddenly:

"Would you like to come round to the stables and look at that colt?"

Buddy loved him. He was about to accept the invitation rapturously when he felt the touch of the cold finger of prudence.

"I'd love to. But perhaps better not. Also perhaps it would be better if no one knows I've been here."

Flower nodded. "I see. It's difficult to remember that you're the other fellow all the time."

"Besides, I must be going." He picked up his hat. "I'm catching the 5.20 back to town."

Flower moved to the door. "I'll see you out."

"Don't," said Buddy. "Ring the bell. I'll find my way to the front door, where your butler will see me off the premises. You won't curse him, will you, for letting me in?"

"Of course not."

Buddy laughed. "Well, as for thanks, you've got to imagine them. They're too many and too deep for me to express. Good-bye."

Flower opened the door and put out his hand.

"If things weren't so impossible I'd say I hope we'll meet again."

"That's kind of you," said Buddy. "But, after all, who knows?"

Buddy marched on air over the carpeted corridor. At the front door stood the butler.

"You'll not be dismissed, Smith," said Buddy. "So you lose. Anyhow, here are the two fivers I promised you."

Smith shook his head wonderingly as Buddy disappeared at a turn in the drive. This was a new Sir Atherton who danced to the fluttering of five-pound notes.

