

## CHAPTER XI

WHEN Buddy returned to London, Fear crouched behind him, an almost physical presence, something small and obscene; now and then he felt its clammy touch on his neck. He recalled the steps of his unspeakable adventure. The desperate plight of his degradation growing deeper week by week. His brother's cold hatred. The irresistible temptation. The wild frenzy of yielding to its drama. The subsequent acting of it. The thrill of success. The carelessness of confidence. Then Muriel and the approach of Fear. Diana and the leap of his heart towards her gay splendour; the one woman in the world, since the far-off day when Mona died, who had flashed over his soul all that woman should be—all, at any rate that woman meant to him—love and loyalty and understanding and comradeship; and passionate response could he but evoke it. Unguarded moments, quick realization of danger, foolish efforts to make Atherton tear off the Athertonian mask and reveal himself as a robust, life-loving human being. Consciousness of failure. Fear clinging tighter and tighter to him. The clammy paw was now just behind his ear. He brushed it away half-consciously whenever he felt it.

It was a more malignant and obscene Fear than ever which hag-rode him on his return.

He had delivered his secret into another's custody. He did not fear betrayal. To a man like Horatio

Flower it would be the secret of the confessional. Buddy lay awake of nights trying to explain to himself his unquestioned faith in this much-wronged, honourable man. He could only conclude that Flower was far above him in the scale of humanity. Up to a certain parting of the ways they had both been trained in the same traditions of English life: proud birth, public school, university, war—both, on broad lines, *pari passu*. And then the break. Was it circumstance or character?

Buddy, honest with himself, knew that it was character. Would Flower, confronted by such a temptation as his own, have yielded? Never. Buddy abused himself. Wasn't there something in the Bible about Reuben? "Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." That was himself, Buddy Drake.

The touch of the Fear set quivering all sorts of unsuspected nerves.

Here was a man, born to be his blood brother—the blood brother of Buddy, say, in 1917—the fine flower of country England, who must regard him as the most damnable and sneaking scoundrel in the world. Buddy was not deceived by his eventual friendliness. Their relations were fantastically abnormal. Even the pathetic gesture implied in the invitation to visit the colt was that of the shy child, "Will you come out and see my rabbits?"

It was horrible. Here was a man after his own heart who must, from every standard by which he had been born and bred, regard him as the scum of the earth, knowing him as an impostor.

Then there was another human creature. . . .

Good God! thought Buddy, lying awake in the quiet darkness of the Park Lane flat, was ever man in so paralysing a state of isolation? There were but three people in the world who were to him of

primitive concern. Three people only whose destinies mattered, insomuch as they were intertangled with his own: Horatio Flower, Diana, and the stray waif Tonio Gaffarelli. Not another living soul mattered.

Muriel? As far as she concerned him she was the dream of a shadow, the shadow of a dream, a meaningless wraith, although to the unhappy Horatio she was the woman of flesh and blood, infinitely desired.

In the obvious way of life Muriel walked, a gracious, hapless lady who had followed the most fatuous of fires into the wilderness wherein she now lay. To him she was the least interesting of ladies. He consoled himself by the thought that he had done his best for her.

But in his own phantasmagorically constricted life how could she count as a vivid personage?

Buddy shivered that night in bed under the cold little fingers of Fear. He could feel the tickling of the covering fur. He was monstrously alone.

And he was monstrously alone in a society wherein Atherton had moved as a well-known figure. Hitherto madman's luck had befriended him. *Fortuna favet fatuis*. It amuses the Lady to protect fools. But she tires of the game pretty quickly. He must trust her no longer. No more gay imprudences.

For the next few days he lived like a prisoner in the Park Lane flat. Again he impressed on Bronson the importance of secrecy. To callers, telephoners, he was still in Paris. Those importunately demanding his Paris address must be told that his stay in Paris was of uncertain duration. What Bronson thought of it all Buddy could not know, for Bronson took his orders with a grave face, as though occasional hiding from him had been one of Atherton's familiar habits. He spoke to Bronson as little as possible. Tonio, in official position, acted, whenever he could, as intermediary. Tonio played his part with unquestioning loyalty. He

was the newly engaged Italian secretary who had never seen Sir Atherton before. In the presence of Bronson at their sedate meals they played scholar and secretary so conscientiously that Buddy's nerves almost gave way. They exchanged commonplaces in French, which he hoped Bronson would take for Italian. Often, in order to escape from Bronson, he ate with Tonio in restaurants off the map of Athertonian London; funny little places in Soho where Tonio was delightedly at home; now and then in old City eating-houses of which Buddy proclaimed, perhaps mendaciously, the excellence of the good old honest English fare. Here, too, the chauffeur, accustomed to deposit Sir Atherton at the august steps of the Athenæum or, on occasions, at the Ritz or Claridge's, had to be considered. Buddy's strategic conduct of the car became a maddening ordeal of subterfuge.

The weather was the ordinary foul London December weather of fog and rain and mud. None but full-blooded lunatics would walk about the streets for pleasure, and only the needy must do it out of necessity. The notoriously invalid master of the car and of Bronson could not walk in fog and rain and mud. Buddy, deprived of exercise, felt the threatening growth of all his bodily tissues, including his liver. It was a dog's life.

With Tonio's help he got through the mass of unanswered correspondence. Nearly all the answers obeyed a formula, modelled with sobriety and verisimilitude on his first airy sketch. What else could be done? Pleading more neuritis than ever, he himself typed out a couple of colourless letters to Muriel, hating himself with all his heart. He had also to reply to telegrams from Diana which informed him of Muriel's strides along the path to recovery, and urged his immediate return to Paris. It was all heartrending,

confusing and informed with Fear. How would the poor lady bear the shock of the withdrawal of divorce proceedings?

Edgar Fry rang him up. His solicitors and stock-brokers alone were allowed to know of his presence in London, and Bronson was ordered to put through their calls. Fry, whom in his new-found prudence he had not visited, reported a telephone conversation with Horatio Flower's solicitors. They had received instructions from Mr. Flower to withdraw the petition. Fry congratulated him on escape from absurd public scandal. When could Fry see him? Buddy answered that he was very ill and couldn't see anybody, and was planning to get out of England for ever on the first fine day. Newstead Park? Oh, yes. He had been down there and taken out all his intimate possessions, and the place could now be sold as it stood, lock, stock and barrel. Would he accept the offer? Certainly. He was far too ill to cope with negotiations. If Fry would send him a power of attorney with regard to the sale of Newstead, he would sign it. The rest would concern Fry.

So far so good. The dreadful damp house was practically off his hands. He would think of it no more. Flower had kept his word. He awaited news from Paris.

Meanwhile the heavy steel despatch-box lay unopened on the library table. Unsuccessfully he ransacked the flat for keys. The more he looked at the box, the more sinister a casket did it appear. It contained something—of that he felt assured—that Atherton was impelled to keep, something that must remain, during his lifetime at any rate, in impenetrable secrecy. The more he thought of the mystery of the lost keys, the more was he convinced that they lay somewhere in safe custody.

At the Bank? He sent Tonio round with a guardedly written letter. The manager reported that a search in the strong room where Sir Atherton's securities, et cetera, were deposited, resulted in no discovery of keys. After a while in his careless way he set the despatch-box in a corner and tried to forget it.

Then there came the inevitable telegrams and letters from Paris.

Horatio has stopped proceedings. What is the meaning of it? DIANA.

This makes everything ten times worse than before. What is to be done? M.

A letter from Muriel which he had to glance through, hating himself all the time. It was vile to pry into the intimate secrets of a woman's life. But the pathetic appeal must be answered. He thanked God that at any rate it was vague and toneless, very much like Muriel herself as he had seen her in the sick-room.

The next day a telegram from Diana :

H. seems to have gone mad so am packing off M. in ambulance, with D. V. to-night to Menton villa.

D. V.? Yes, that was Dolly Valentine, who seemed to share with Diana the responsibility of looking after Muriel. Diana had spoken of her on various occasions. But whether she was Miss, Mrs. or Lady, he had no idea. Nor did he know the name of the villa. "Dolly's villa" had been Muriel's projected destination.

Diplomatic correspondence in all these circumstances

was both delicate and fraught with danger. It took him a whole morning to compose a letter to Muriel which should be at once colourless and yet express some sort of decent human feeling. He wrote in the dark, for not yet, either from Muriel's letter or from Diana's telegram, could he gather the nature of Horatio's madness.

"We must get away soon, my dear Tonio," he said one afternoon. "This climate will be the death of me—and of you!"

"Me?" Tonio shrugged his shoulders. He had weathered the inclemencies of the New World winters, in New York, Chicago, Denver—every kind of a city in which snow and blizzards were as much common-places as sunshine in summer. Compared with them raw, foggy London was a comfortable Turkish bath.

"Where do we go?" he asked.

"South Africa is a warm place," said Buddy. "Why shouldn't we look into things there? That infernal car is even now at the door. Now there's something for you and Westover to do. Tell him to drive you to the Union Castle offices in—we'll find the address in the telephone book—and get all the information you can and see what are the earliest reservations you can make. Two cabins and a private bathroom."

The sudden idea amused and excited him. He sent off a Tonio only too desirous of secretarial employment. He accompanied him to the door with laughing instructions. The company must give him the best; otherwise he would build a fleet for himself and ruin the line. He called him back, while his hand was on the bell-push of the lift.

"Tell them I must have a suite with a private sitting-room."

Why not? Money mattered nothing. He would go out in state. As the lift mounted into view he called out:

“Charter the damned ship.”

He was in one of his sudden ebullient moods. It was a gorgeous idea. South of the Equator! He would cross the Line. A touch of romance. Once across the Border, and the danger was left behind. He laughed and threw back the door.

He caught sight of a letter in the letter-box. He took it out. It bore no stamp; had been slipped in by the writer or by messenger. The address was typewritten. It contained a quarto page torn from a book, which was covered in manuscript with an arithmetical nightmare of figures. They were arranged in the form of fractions, with varying numbers of digits both in numerators and denominators.

Buddy sat down at the writing-table and pored over the mysterious document. Its nature could bear only three interpretations. It came from Bedlam or a cognate institution. It was the solution of some abstruse mathematical problem. It was a message in cipher. Now, it had too much method for madness; arithmetic had even less meaning to a mathematician than the alphabet to a poet; so, by process of elimination, it must be cipher. He could make nothing of it. During the War, he remembered, there were specialists attached to staffs who could decipher anything. He wished he had been on the staff and had learned their tricks instead of foot-slogging it in trenches where nothing useful was taught except how to suffer evil smells and regard vermin as God's creatures. But what was Atherton doing with cipher? Speculation being vain, he threw the paper into a drawer of the table and tried to forget all about it.

He had been but an hour seeking oblivion of the



cipher in a comforting drink and a detective novel, when the door flew open and Diana sailed in.

He had a fleeting vision of a scared Bronson framed in the doorway. He rose.

"I know," cried Diana. "I've made Bronson break orders. I felt you were in, somehow. At any rate he couldn't prevent my coming in and writing a note. So you must forgive him."

He shook hands with her and said gravely, prudently :

"Bronson should have known, Diana, that the *consigne* couldn't apply to you."

"But why the *consigne*? Are you playing hermit?"

"I'm by no means well," said Buddy. "And then—and then"—his imagination began to work—"everything has conspired to upset me. There are two or three men in my line, my subject, in London just at present, an American, a Swede and a German. They all think I'm an authority on Platonic philosophy and want to see me. I don't want to see them. I'm not equal to the strain of their intellectual vitality. They would bore me. I hate being bored."

She looked at him in her ironical way, sitting in the fireside chair to which he had invited her.

"Paris seems to be better for your health than London."

"Possibly," he said. Then abruptly, "How is Muriel?"

"All right. Quite out of danger. And now comfortably settled at Dolly Valentine's. I found a wire awaiting my arrival. Did you get one?"

Buddy nodded. He had received a télégram that afternoon :

Arrived safely not too tired. Love. M.

"Dolly will take good care of her."

"I'm sure she will. Cigarette?"

He handed her the box and bent over her with a match. She looked up with a polite smile of thanks. Buddy threw the match somewhat viciously into the fire. If eyes could thank so wondrously for a trivial act, what world of super-wonder lay hidden behind them!

"I came to you as soon as I could," she said, "to find out about things. Your letters haven't been illuminating."

Buddy replied that there was nothing he could illuminate. One week Muriel's husband filed a petition for divorce, the next he withdrew it. A disconcerting fellow.

"What do you propose to do about it?"

"What do you suggest?"

She laughed scornfully. "Both of you are different from me. Different, too, from poor old Horatio—although I don't like him. If I were a man in your romantic situation I'd take the woman I loved off to Fiji or anywhere, and tell the world to go to hell. And if I were a woman in Muriel's position, I'd expect it."

"I wonder if you would—really," said he.

She started on a note in his voice.

"What?"

He recovered himself quickly. "It's easy to say those things. But the conduct of human life must be governed by reason."

"Oh, Lord!" said Diana. She threw the end of her cigarette into the fire. "That's what Muriel says. A bit of a parrot, Muriel."

He gave her a swift glance, rose and walked about the room. There she sat, provocative, scornful, glowing, in some sort of dim-green kit, hat and all, which blended, as it were subserviently, into the colouring

of her face, her eyes, the wisps of dark hair at the temples below the brim of her hat. Her furs lay on a distant chair. He forgot everything for the moment but her marvellous perfection. He heard her voice, soft, deep, resonant :

“ I wish you two people would explain to me the relation between reason and love.”

He turned, forgetting Atherton.

“ There isn't any ! ”

Their eyes met, hers in challenge.

“ Then why not Fiji ? ”

He swept his hands over his eyes in a helpless gesture. Diana unconsciously saved him from folly.

“ I can't understand you two. I never did. I wish to God I could. Love ? I don't know. For you two Love seems to be an aquarium with the water kept judiciously tepid.”

An attitude was imperative.

He stood over her, outraged stick of a lover.

“ You are insulting.”

She shrugged carelessly. “ Perhaps I am. Why shouldn't I be ? I love my sister beyond anything you can conceive in the way of love. I know she's a sentimental, weak little fool. She was all right with Horatio until you came along. Then you talked to her about Plato and Shakespeare and William James, and persuaded her to see what a poor mutt a man must be who lived for dogs and horses and postage-stamps and prize sweet peas and vegetable marrows. Oh, I know all about it ! ”

“ Then why did you side with me against Flower ? ” he asked sharply.

She threw up her hand. “ You're always asking for reasons. I don't know. Horatio never liked me. I was different from Muriel, I suppose. Too modern, perhaps. He belongs to the early nineteenth century

and likes his women to be of the period. Our first quarrel was over Jane Austen. I'm a heretic about Jane. I shiver with horror when I think that my great, or my great-great-grandmother was one of those ghastly females."

"Why ghastly?"

"Through the repression of their awful civilization. Their ideal was to be outwardly sexless. Their training taught them that sex impulses came from the devil, and any betrayal of them was the height of immodesty. Oh, my dear Atherton, I'm not going to give you a lecture on sex throughout the ages. I think I could if I tried to, and it'd shock you to the core of your incomprehensibly intellectual soul. But what I want to get at is this. Horatio's ideal is the Jane Austen female. I'm nothing at all like it. I'm quite a decent girl, Atherton, as you know. But I can't wear any damn silly veils making me half an Oriental slave and half a Virgin Mary, which Jane Austen's young men expected their wives to be. I expect a man to regard me sexually and intellectually in exactly the same way as I regard him. The only difference between us is the physiological fact that if we come together I bear the children; he doesn't. That's woman's disability—or ability if you look at it the other way round. And when I'm busy having babies, he's damn well got to be busy trying to support them. It's fifty-fifty on that side of life. It's clean common sense. I say 'clean.' Horatio and I differed on the meaning of the word. He has the master mind of his great-grandfather. He thinks me a young woman without any sense of morality. In fact, a scarlet young woman."

Buddy laughed. "I think you're a bit unjust to Horatio."

"Why?"

He replied deliberately:

"If he were the early Victorian sultan you describe, he wouldn't be trying to forgive Muriel, and—well, get her back. There can be only one reason for his present action."

"And you commend him—calmly, coolly, philosophically—just like that?"

"Perhaps," said Buddy, "it would be the best for our three lives."

She sat bolt upright. "So you throw her over?"

"I must give her time to reconsider her position."

"Then if Horatio followed her to Menton—he has already written her idiot letters—and said, 'Let us bury the past and begin all over again,' and she consented, you would take it lying down?"

He threw out his hands. "What else could I do?"

"My God!" cried Diana. She rose with a cruel laugh. "What a delicate, what a perfect lover! Good-bye, my friend."

She moved to the door, very scornful. He intercepted her and seized her wrists.

"I don't care a damn what you think of me. I wish to God I'd never seen Muriel. It was a nightmare of a mistake. It's you I want. You. From the very first time I met you. Now you know!"

He released her. She stared at him in shivering amazement.

"Have you gone mad?"

"Perfectly mad."

She recovered herself. There was challenge in her eyes.

"What do you expect me to do?"

He flung open the door.

"Go out and forget that such a born fool ever existed."

"I certainly shall," she said, her head in the air.