

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER many days' poring over the complete transliteration of the cipher scripts, he could get very little further. Here and there he gathered from separable German words that "merken"—which he knew meant marks—played a great part in the correspondence. In the Latin there was indubitable reference to financial transactions, apparently on a great scale. But, although he worked himself into a state of moral and almost physical emaciation, he could find no real key to the mystery; and Tonio, who was even less equipped than he in knowledge of the German and Latin tongues, was as useless as a sewing-maid set down to answer an examination paper in the Cambridge Mathematical Tripos. And never did either German or Latin give him the slightest clue to the address or real identity of Andrea Chrysolos, or to the name in which Atherton held his account at the bank in Lothbury, E.C.

But the more he pored, and the more emaciated did he become in his unprecedented intellectual efforts, the more did it become apparent to his essentially simple mind that here were hidden the secrets of a shameful and dishonourable drama. For there were dates of the War—and these were the most frequent; dates immediately post-war; only a few scraps bearing recent dates. Figures, he had discovered, had a little code of their own. The figure 1 was "a," 2 was "b," and so on for the ten digits. The "a," "b,"

etc., were in their turn treated according to the elastic fractional code.

It was all dark and horrible. Whether what he could surmise branded Atherton as an agent in the pay of a hostile power during the War, or as a cynical exploiter of the European general financial situation during or immediately after the Armistice, he could not accurately determine. At any rate, it was beyond human common sense to doubt that the sinister mass of documents, if reduced to cold English, would account for Atherton's astounding rise to fortune in so short a period. Equal to his own, Atherton's sole fortune had been twenty thousand pounds. He, Buddy, had squandered it like a fool. Atherton had guarded it like a prudent man. But how could one turn twenty thousand into two hundred thousand—to say nothing of the thousands that lay in the Lothbury Bank—without working for it? Salaries in minor political office could be disregarded. There were only two solutions to Atherton's sudden rise to fortune. One was a series of gambles in War industrial concerns. Fortunes had been made that way, in spite of the eighty per cent. excess profits tax. But Atherton, cold, calculating fish, was the last man to stake a shilling on any hazard. The other solution lay in these mystic sheets. And it was a story of cold and cynical dishonour. Perhaps of Treason—of High Treason. Sales of secret knowledge of things military, economic, financial—how could he tell?—to a foreign Government, with this eloquent and friendly Greek gentleman, Mr. Andrea Chrysolos, as go-between.

It was during these days that Buddy, for the sake of⁹⁾ sanity, wore out the patient Tonio in lessons in prestidigitation.

Christmas came upon him before he realized it.

But what could Christmas matter? For years in his vagrant life it had only been a weary season of extra loneliness. He had come to hate its everywhere advertised assertion of festivity. Lord Street, Southport, seemed to go loathsomely mad. Its shops ran riot into fantastically unreal Christmas conviviality. He knew not which he detested most: the fat rosetted ox carcasses in the butchers' shops, the strings of geese and turkeys in the poulterers', the insane little figures of Father Christmas, white-bearded, cowed, rubicund, shamelessly Teutonic—if you turned them upside down you'd see "Made in Bavaria"—the vulgar mass upon mass of futile vanities in the vanity shop windows, the "Christmas gifts," "Christmas this . . ." "Christmas that . . .", the mechanical toys for children which any child, on its receipt from an uncle, would regard with a sickly smile of disappointed thanks, saying in its heart: "Of all the dam silly half-wits."

"This artificial family rejoicing," said Buddy, on one of these morning walks, "makes me sick. Even when I was a boy my mother took a malign pleasure in giving me things I wouldn't be seen dead with. She once gave me a tricycle, when already I was scooting about all over the place on the groom's bicycle. And then I remember a tie—a sort of 2nd Fishguard's tie, which I handed over to a girl in a confectioner's shop in Cambridge who didn't know how to break off an engagement with an impoverished young scholar of Magdalene. 'Give him this,' said I, 'and it'll do it.' And it did."

"You are talking, Buddy," said Tonio, "with the foolish bitterness of a lonely man. I am lonely but for you. I know I am foolish. But thank God I'm not bitter."

Buddy laughed. "You're a little plaster saint.

That's why I like you. If you've anything more to say, carry on."

"Why not take pleasure in looking at beauty?" said the little man, with a nod of his head towards a shop front stocked with leather and silver and gold and onyx and tortoise-shell and jade. "That dressing-case fitted with cut crystal and lapis lazuli. Why not let your eyes enjoy beautiful things!"

Buddy laughed again. Tonio was right. The dressing-case had its points. He paused and gave it more than a casual glance. For a thing of vanity, perhaps, from the masculine point of view, of sheer uselessness, it was also one of beauty. The glass receptacles were of cut crystal. The fittings—caps to bottles, backs to brushes and combs, handles to the various gadgets necessary for the trimming up of woman, were in lapis lazuli.

He was about to say jestingly to Tonio, "I wish I knew a woman I could give it to," when he suddenly remembered that there was a woman to whom he suddenly and madly desired to give it.

That afternoon in Paris when the barrier of Muriel had been temporarily overlooked, and they were talking in idle, friendly fashion of the Vanity of Human Wishes, or what not, Diana had said:

"There are many things I've wanted all my life which I shall never get. A villa in Cannes, a super Rolls-Royce with super chauffeur all my own, a thousand pound dressing-case . . ."

She had mentioned the super dressing-case as one of the unattainable things.

He entered the shop, followed by Tonio, and asked the price of the case in the window. It was a cheap thing, according to the salesman, belonging to a line of goods in great demand among the vulgar, costing just a few paltry hundred pounds. If he desired to

see something really important, he would show him the last word in dressing-cases, alone of its kind—not belonging to a line—which was really worth a connoisseur's consideration.

"But I want crystal and lapis," said Buddy.

"Quite," said the shopman. "That's what I want to show you."

He showed. Before the new Gorgeousness the shop window exhibit faded into a tawdry toilet set.

"I'll have it," said Buddy with a lordly air. "It must be sent off at once to London by special messenger."

He drew out a cheque-book.

"I'm afraid," ventured the salesman, "it will take a few days to pass the cheque through."

"It will take five minutes," said Buddy.

Tonio went out with the cheque on the Southport branch of the bank at which Hanover Square had established his credit, and returned with a bewildering mass of Bank of England notes.

Buddy gave the address of Miss Diana Mellow and, being assured that the special messenger would go up to London by the next train, went out of the shop. He had put nothing in the case that could indicate to Diana the source and origin of the gift. Tonio walked in silence by his side in the winter sunshine, along the car-lined pavement.

"What do you think of that, Tonio?" Buddy said at last.

"I think you must be in love with a woman," said Tonio.

Buddy clapped him on the shoulder.

"What a brain! Let us go and eat oysters and drink to her health."

Christmas came and went. The last days of the old year were petering slowly out; slowly because

Buddy was bored to infinite desolation. He had nothing to do ; no companionship save that of Tonio. And Tonio was so patient, so indulgent, so obviously secure in the knowledge that he was suffering from some form of soul-sickness, that there were times when he would have liked to wring the neck of the faithful little man. Walks. Motor-trips to Liverpool, Manchester, Preston—great, whizzing, vitally important cities, but as far as joyous entertainment of the stranger within the gates is concerned, an abomination of drab desolation. Of course there is the proud boast, “What Manchester says to-day, London (or England is it ? or the British Empire ?) will say to-morrow.” But to Buddy who didn’t very much care what anybody said about anything—let alone saying it first—what did that pride of Manchester matter ? No. The great, bright world of Manchester doesn’t live in Manchester. It wouldn’t see itself dead in Manchester. And the great bright world of Liverpool doesn’t live in Liverpool. It wouldn’t see itself dead in Liverpool. Just as the great bright world of London doesn’t live in the City of London, and couldn’t conceive itself being dead in the City. But there is the London of dreams ; so is there the Paris, the Vienna of dreams. Perhaps Edinburgh and Dublin may have a touch of the glamour. But they are capital cities ; and only in capital cities has the glamour its justification for the lost stranger. Buddy found little to do beyond prestidigitating all day long. Even Tonio found occupation in long-neglected study of the English classics. Buddy found him one day deep in the “Faerie Queene.”

“ Oh, my God ! ” said Buddy.

Then suddenly he remembered threats. Payments before the end of the year. He also realized that the embarrassingly faithful Bronson, with whom he had

not communicated since his departure from London, must be in some state of inquietude. He lay awake one morning in a cold sweat. Suppose the fool grew scared, and advertised the mysterious disappearance of Sir Atherton Drake!

He sent Tonio to London. That was one of his eternal preoccupations: how to give Tonio jobs; how to persuade the conscientious and proud little man that he was living on deserved earnings and not on charity. He sent him to London with elaborate instructions to spy out the land, reassure Bronson, and return with his accumulated correspondence. A few learned books picked haphazard from the shelves would maintain in Bronson's mind the fiction of close scholarly pursuits.

Tonio returned with a budget of trivial and important items. Bronson had suffered from great anxiety which now was relieved, although he was at a loss to understand the reason for his unknown and even now unrevealed address. There were few letters. None from Muriel or from Diana. One from Chrysolos in cipher, which he put aside to be decoded. A copy of "The Times" of three days ago, which Bronson, assiduous reader of the august periodical, had marked and handed to Tonio with the puzzled inquiry whether Sir Atherton had seen it. Buddy, whose attitude towards *The Times* was that of Stevenson's hero towards the old *Athenæum*—"Golly, what a paper!"—had scarcely ever opened its pages. But, in this instance, there was no need to do more than glance at the first page. The top line in the column, the head of the so-called agony column, announced:

"Sir Atherton Drake is very seriously requested to communicate with Paternoster before 31st December."

"That's straight from the shoulder, isn't it?" said Buddy.

"It's a gun at your head," said Tonio.

"Let me get at the beastly man," said Buddy, picking up the fraction-filled page. "Find me the key."

He deciphered :

"I have done all possible. 'The Times' announcement must reach you wherever you are, and no matter how ill you are. It must be cabled to you by your friends or legal representatives. If nothing heard or done by 15th January, on that day papers and proofs will be sent to high authorities. Again let me say I cannot conceive breach so long honourable relations."

"Buddy," said Tonio anxiously, "what is the meaning of this?"

"It means," replied Buddy, "that we've got to get out—and get out damned quick."

It was a situation of tantalizing fantasticality. There was only one thing to be done—the insertion in *The Times* of a reply :

"Paternoster. Lost address. Please give it."

Two or three miserable days followed. Tonio was again despatched to London. He returned with a telegram :

"Lothbury, as usual."

This was something definite. It gave him something to do. He drafted a letter in cipher on some Park Lane Mansions notepaper which Tonio had brought down.

MY DEAR ANDREA,—

I have been very ill and am only now able to attend to business. Your suggestion is most reasonable. But why all this mystery? I can't be bothered with converting money into bonds to bearer. My ordinary cheque should be sufficient. My confidential secretary will make any appointment you like, Park Lane, and will hand you cheque on return of documents of which

he will hold list. Or, if you suspect false dealing cheque, will discuss bearer bonds. Too ill to see you myself.

ATHERTON DRAKE.

A horrible week passed, the latter part of which Tonio spent in London, calling day by day for letters. At last he returned to Southport. The letter addressed to "Andrea Chrysolos, Esq., c/o London & Northern Bank, Lothbury, E.C." had been returned through the Post Office, "Addressee unknown."

Then the fear of God and the fear of more than God got around Buddy. Mysterious and deadly forces were converging upon him. Every succeeding morning of the New Year dawned upon him as he lay in a cold sweat. He took in *The Times*, which reached Southport about midday. He had no use for any of its urbane contents but the ghastly first-page column. One day the top line had nothing but the words, in capital letters:

"Sir Atherton Drake."

He passed the newspaper to Tonio, who remarked: "It might be Chicago."

"I wish to God it was," cried Buddy. "There I'd find some way out. Here there's none. I'm between the devil and the deep sea."

Tonio shrugged. "If you would only give me your confidence, I might be able to suggest something."

Buddy stared at him for a few moments.

"I believe you're right," he said. "It's unfair on you to keep you in the dark. The only thing is that if we go on working together you'll be what the lawyers call a *particeps criminis*—a partner in crime. You must take the risk."

Tonio smiled, and there was a kindly light in his dark eyes.

"I have too much faith in your goodness, Buddy, to be afraid."

"I'm a fraud, a colossal fraud," said Buddy.

"On the vastness of it," said Tonio gently, with an expressive upward gesture of his maimed hand, "I have not cared to speculate."

"Hell!" said Buddy. "Sit down and I'll tell you all about it."

For the second time he made confession.

The little white-haired man with the dark mobile face regarded him mournfully, asking questions, getting answers now in self-justification, now in frank avowal of wrong-doing.

"You have done a foolish thing," he said. "You have put yourself beyond—what you a-call it?—the pale of the law. All this evil money does not belong to you."

"Of course it doesn't," cried Buddy. "It belongs to an unborn academy and a dead political party."

"Who is to know that?" asked Tonio.

"What do you mean?"

"Who knows what was in the will which you destroyed?"

"Why, the lawyers who drew it up!"

"But they told you they had sent it back to your brother some time before you made your change of identity. He was to alter it. Why should he not have destroyed it before you came? Who can prove that, as Buddy Drake, you ever saw the will? Who can prove that you destroyed the will? That, as you say, is the greatest crime before the law that you have committed."

Buddy wiped a perspiring brow. The room was overheated by a roaring fire, and his blood was overheated by two hours' tensivity of emotional living.

"You're damn clever," said he. "Your Italian brain, I suppose. I never thought of it."

"Did you tell the lawyers you had seen the will?"

Buddy plunged into an agony of recollection. "No. I let them tell me."

"Then," said Tonio, "if your brother had destroyed the will and had made no other, you would naturally inherit his estate as next-of-kin, just as you inherit the title."

"That seems to be right; but what are you driving at?"

"I am trying to think for you, Buddy. You have never been able, all the long time I have known you, to think for yourself. You do things without thinking: sometimes wicked things; sometimes silly, silly things; sometimes beautiful things. And that's why I love you and why I trust you and why I know you would share your last bit of bread with me; and why all my devotion——"

"Oh, stop," Buddy interrupted. He knew all that. "I'm a peculiar brand of damned fool with a sort of ballast of decent feeling. And you're one of God's best. Let's leave it at that. Let's come down to earth. You've grasped the situation in a way I'd never have thought possible. You say that, supposing I'm found out as a fraud, no one can prove that I committed the major crime of destroying the will. That, boiling it down, my only provable offence was the false declaration of death."

"I am not a lawyer," said Tonio. "I am only an uneducated Italian-American. But both Italy and America are noted for just horse-sense, Buddy."

"And so you think all's well?"

"I do not," replied Tonio earnestly.

Buddy turned away. There were times when Tonio's

eyes were those of a dog, and at the same time those of an infernal saint in some early Italian picture.

"I do not. By no means," said Tonio. "I think it's all bad. As bad as bad can be."

Buddy lit a cigarette, and threw himself into an arm-chair. The early January twilight creeping into the room began gradually to darken.

"Go on. This promises to be the cheeriest conversation I've had for years."

Tonio went on. Tonio, with his astute intelligence, and with remorseless logic, set out before him his present situation. He reduced it to its simplest factors.

"You have no existence, my poor Buddy," he said. "As Buddy Drake, you buried yourself in your family vault. As Sir Atherton Drake you don't dare exist much longer. If you could pay the man Chrysolos, as your brother would have paid him, things might be different."

"That's it," said Buddy. "If I could only get hold of the fool."

Tonio came forward and touched him on the shoulder.

"But, even if you did, what about all this money? This dishonourable money? This traitor's money, as it seems to me? Don't you think that Chrysolos has had his eye on it all the time? Why do you think your brother willed it away to universities and political parties?"

"He had no one to leave it to except me, whom he loathed."

"And the lady whom he took away from her husband? Couldn't she do, like anyone else, with mucha money?"

Tonio's idea began to penetrate Buddy's brain. He scratched his head as though to facilitate access.

"Good Lord!" he said.

By bequeathing his ill-gotten fortune to an indivi-

dual, Atherton may have been conscious that behind him he was leaving a heritage of woe. Corporations are incapable of suffering from woe. They would look after themselves in their cold, hard-headed way. A drifting woman couldn't. Besides, was there not the possibility that through the callous time-server—to give Atherton the most euphemistic name—there ran one clean streak? Apart from possible danger, he could not leave Muriel this mass of tainted money. It would have taken a far profounder student of human nature than Buddy to solve the question. He knew that men were capable of any outward inconsistencies of conduct that the human mind could conceive. Only a few days ago he had talked with Tonio of a gunman in Cleveland, Ohio, lately apprehended for having shot several families in cold blood, whom they had known as a superb flute-player and the most model and sentimental husband and father of children.

There was Atherton, the passionate scholar, the lover of women, the idolator of all the outer British respectabilities; yet equally unconcerned with his country's safety, with his own honour as a man; and yet again, scrupulous as to the happiness of the woman he loved.

"I give it up," he said.

"Give what up, Buddy?"

"Accounting for Atherton."

"There's a lot more, Buddy, that I think you must give up."

"What?"

"Everything," said Tonio, making a motion in the darkness, with his two withered hands.

He stood in the firelight, white-headed, hollow-eyed, dark-clad, spare and vibrating, an uncanny figure. His broken shadow fell grotesque on the opposite wall.

"Give it all up, Buddy. Buddy Drake is dead. Atherton Drake must be dead too. As I said—you have no existence. You must create one for yourself—a new one. . . ."

The little man went on for awhile, and Buddy sat under his spell. At last he rose and said in an amaze :

"How the devil did you learn all this ?"

Tonio crossed the room and switched on the light. The wizardry of his elfin figure before the glow of the fire had vanished. He was just the pathetic little elderly Tonio.

"I told you before. By conjuring," he said.

Buddy helped himself to a drink from the sideboard. Then :

"For any sake let's have a bit of time off. My head's going round. I'll go mad. Let's have an hour's practice."

"Very well," said Tonio. "I have some new things come this morning from London. Made to my specification. A new invention, Buddy. You shall see. They're in my room. I'll unpack the case. You are right. It doesn't do anybody good to think too long of dreadful things."

Buddy responded to his smile. "You're a wonderful chap, Tonio. God knows what I'd do without you."

What he immediately did without him was to clap his hands to an aching head and plunge his thoughts back again into the whirlpool of his brother's life.

On a straight-backed chair, in a corner of the formal and soulless hotel sitting-room, stood the black steel despatch-box, container of hideous and shameful secrets. He strode towards it. These he could get rid of for ever, at any rate. He took out the armful of documents, cast them on the hearth-rug, and then threw them, chunk by chunk, into the fire whose coals he stirred with the poker into leaping flames.

Tonio came in, followed by hotel servants carrying a mass of velvet and steel paraphernalia. He looked in alarm at the fire, at Buddy—and signed to the servants to put his bundle down and depart.

“What have you done?” he cried, as soon as the door closed.

“I’ve burned the whole damned thing.”

“But, my God!” cried Tonio, with eyes of despair, “don’t you know what you have done? You have, in fact, burned your boats. You have burned every defence your brother could have held against Chrysolos.”

“No!” cried Buddy, staring at him open-mouthed.

“Yes. Do you suppose a man like your brother would keep things only incriminating to himself? It’s not common sense.”

Tonio went on. Buddy smote his brow.

“Of course. It stands to reason. Why should Chrysolos be content with so little? What is a thousand pounds—five thousand dollars—a year to a black-mailer who knows the other man has hundreds of thousands? Why was he content? Because he knew that your brother, who was not a fool like you, could reply with those papers and he would be . . . pst!”

He snapped his fingers in an expressive upward gesture.

“Be what?” said Buddy.

“Be? Be bust, *Dio*! Don’t you see? They held papers against each other like hands in a poker-game. It was to be a game of bluff to the end. Chrysolos has called your bluff. You’ve thrown your hand into the fire.”

“He doesn’t know that,” said Buddy.

“He soon will,” said Tonio.

“What am I to do?” asked Buddy.

“That I don’t know,” said Tonio very sadly. “How

should a poor fellow like me know? I can only tell you what I think of the muddle that you're in."

Buddy took a last gulp of his drink.

"Supposing you were in my position, what would you do?"

"I would first go to my confessor and clear my conscience."

"But I haven't any confessor, and I haven't anything so heavy on my conscience. So that's no good. Let us be practical. You know everything about me and Atherton. Apparently more than I know myself. What would you advise?"

"I?" He looked up at Buddy with a wrinkle at the corner of his lips and a twinkle in his dark eyes. And he kept the pose dramatically for a few moments. Then he went to a little side table on which lay the two or three packs of cards used for their daily practice. He spread out a pack with his swift, professional touch and brought out a Knave of Clubs.

"What would I advise? Well, look you here, Buddy. This is you. The Jack of Clubs. See? What I advise for you is to do like him. See?"

Buddy could have sworn that the Knave of Clubs flicked upwards by Tonio's fingers had disappeared into thin air.

"God! How did you do that?"

"You will only learn," said Tonio, "when you do the same as he did."