

CHAPTER XV

THEY returned to London and put up, under false names, at a small hotel in Cromwell Road which was far enough away from the sphere of Atherton's activities. They seemed to have disappeared completely. Nothing new appeared in the agony column of *The Times*. Buddy and Tonio had many arguments.

"You see, we've called Chrysolos's bluff and nothing has happened."

"That doesn't mean that nothing will happen," urged Tonio.

"Let us wait until it does."

Tonio would shrug desperate shoulders. Something would surely happen, and that very soon. He passed unhappy days. Buddy grew impatient.

"You're a Latin and you're superstitious. If you see a black cat rubbing itself against a lamp-post you think there's a policeman waiting for me round the corner."

"I feel that some day there will be hundreds waiting."

Then arose the question of their ultimate land of refuge. Tonio counselled America. Buddy manifested lukewarm enthusiasm. He had spent there too many hopeless and bitter years.

"What can be more hopeless and bitter than the time you are passing now in England?" asked Tonio.

Buddy agreed that his life was none of the

pleasantest. It was a loafing life devoid of purpose. Anyhow, before taking flight he must put his house in order. Bronson, for instance, must be provided for. He entrusted Tonio with many confidential errands, Tonio giving out to those whom it concerned that Sir Atherton lay ill in a nursing-home abroad, guarded by doctors who forbade him to hold any communication with the outside world. Tonio's credentials, amounting to a kind of power of attorney, signed by Atherton Drake, were not contested.

The days hung heavy on Buddy's hands. He took to walking after dusk, with apparent aimlessness, about the streets of the West End. Now and then Tonio accompanied him. Once they turned down Sloane Street. Midway, on the eastern side, Buddy stopped short before the window of an antique furniture shop—Merro, Ltd.—and suddenly gripped Tonio by the arm. Inside the shop, talking with a man and a woman, obviously customers, stood Diana. She was displaying a chair, evidently pointing out its signs of genuineness. Her face was smiling and animated.

"God!" cried Buddy. "What wouldn't I give to be able to go in? This is the first time I've caught sight of her."

"Come away, Buddy," said Tonio. "Such things are foolish."

Buddy allowed himself to be led from the window. He gave a short laugh.

"If I could only get a glimpse of her any time, I think I could stick it."

"One more reason for your going away at once," said Tonio. "There's no sense in playing round like this."

"Have I ever done anything with any sense in it in my life?" asked Buddy.

"You bought my monkeys," said the little man.
"By the way, where are they?" Buddy asked.
"I wouldn't lose them for anything."

The next time Tonio went on a mission to Bronson, he was charged to rescue the sacred crew from the flat. Whether they had brought him good or evil luck, in the general sense of the word, he knew not; at any rate, they had brought him Tonio Gaffarelli and his sagacity and loyal devotion. He shuddered to think of what his loneliness would be without Tonio.

The occasion of the salvage of the monkeys was the last on which Tonio was to visit Bronson. For Bronson had been paid his £4000 and was awaiting final instructions. These Tonio conveyed. The flat was to be prepared for a long absence on the part of the owner, shut up, and the keys were to be delivered to Mr. Edgar Fry.

It was a fine evening with a touch of frost in the air. Buddy walked with him for company's sake up Park Lane and halted at Upper Brook Street. When he saw Tonio disappear into the beam of light that marked the entrance to the flats he turned to while away the time of waiting by walking round the quadrilateral formed by Upper Brook Street, Davies Street, Grosvenor Street, and Park Lane. Tonio, his errand fulfilled, by taking the opposite course would necessarily meet him.

He had twice made the circuit and was standing at the Upper Brook Street corner when he saw Tonio dart from the mansions. Immediately at his heels darted another man who, overtaking him, made a sudden grab at the large cardboard box which Tonio carried under his arm. Buddy sprang forward with a "What the devil are you doing?" and then, all of a sudden, he and his pursuer stood stock-still, glaring into each other's eyes.

"So you are Atherton after all."

"And you're Chrysolos, my blackmailing Greek friend, who gave me the key to the famous cipher."

"Why keep up the farce?" said the other angrily. "You fooled me once. You'll not do it again. How do I know you're Atherton? Isn't this Italian well known as Atherton's secretary? And here I find you waiting for him and this box of papers which you're too frightened to go and get for yourself."

Buddy laughed. "My good friend, suppose I am Atherton Drake; what reason can you have for trying to steal my papers?"

"Papers? Mr. Chrysolos thinks they are papers?" cried Tonio, laughing too.

"You're welcome to any documents you find there," said Buddy.

"Shall I show him?" asked Tonio.

Buddy nodded. Tonio undid the parcel and filled Buddy's arms with the monkeys. Chrysolos shook with restrained anger.

"Fooled you again, haven't I?" said Buddy.

Chrysolos cursed. Tonio repacked the monkeys.

"I'll be even with you yet," cried the Greek.

"Don't make a scene," said Buddy quietly, hands on hips. "We don't want a crowd, and to be told to pass along by the police. I had to stop you being quarrelsome, I remember, the last time we met."

"Tell me," said Chrysolos impatiently, though in a lower tone, "why haven't I heard from you?"

"Because you're a most undesirable correspondent. On the other hand, why haven't you carried out your threats? You can't. You know you can't. I was a fool to let you blackmail me for so long. You can do exactly what you like." He snapped his fingers. "I'm through with you."

Tonio's heart beat quick. This was bluffing with a vengeance.

"That is all childish talk," Chrysolos said. "You are afraid. You skulk about in the dark and daren't ever go to your flat. When I call this evening your servant tells me that you are at death's door in a nursing-home in France. Scarcely has the door been shut in my face when up comes your secretary and is at once admitted. I wait, naturally, for your secretary, in order to ask him questions. Then I run into you skulking in the dark." He shrugged. "Of course you're afraid."

"And you—you're afraid," Buddy retorted. "I've got cipher documents too, which I can hold up against you. Though, why you should think I'd carry them about in a cardboard box, I can't imagine."

"You seem to forget the dressmakers' boxes that went through the hands of the lady in Turtle Road, Ealing."

Buddy started and looked for a few seconds stupidly into the dark eyes of his enemy. Then he gave a short laugh. Good Lord! Was this the secret of Atherton's relations with Cora Blenkinsop, the mysterious lady of the will? She was the go-between. Atherton must have puddled through much muddy water.

"I forgive you, Chrysolos," he said. "You went on the theory that criminals always work the same way. Well, you're mistaken. Anyhow, you can take it from me that you'll never see the documents again. And, if you're wise and good, no human eye will ever see them."

He felt Tonio tug at his sleeve. It was a warning tug. Wasn't he carrying his bluff too far? He looked instinctively at the little man still clutching his precious monkeys. The interchange of glances was not lost on the keen eyes of the Greek.

"I'm not afraid of those documents," he said.

Buddy stopped a passing taxi and bade Tonio enter. With his foot on the step he turned to Chrysolos.

"Good night. I'm a bit tired of you."

Chrysolos said grimly :

"Do you want to know why I'm not afraid ? Because I believe those documents don't exist any longer."

He went off. Buddy gave the Cromwell Road address to the driver in a very low voice and they drove off.

"I suppose you're pleased with yourself," said Tonio.

"I don't get much amusement nowadays," replied Buddy. "What else was there to do but call his bluff ?"

"I think he called yours."

"What do you mean ?"

"The papers you burned in Southport."

"Damn !" cried Buddy, starting forward.

He would have been still less amused had he been aware of another taxi tracking him down to his hotel in the Cromwell Road.

A few days afterwards Tonio found at the accommodation address in Kensington which he had given the unsuspecting Bronson a long envelope which, when Buddy opened it, enclosed one headed, "On His Majesty's Service," addressed to Sir Atherton Drake, Bt., and bearing the Foreign Office stamp. Buddy opened it with shaking fingers. It ran :

SIR,

I am desired by the Permanent Secretary to ask you to do him the honour of waiting on him at this office on Tuesday at three o'clock.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

JOHN HAYTHORNE,

Private Secretary.

He passed it on to Tonio to read.

"The hunt's up," he said.

But he did not wait on the Foreign Secretary of the War Office as requested. Neither did he acknowledge the letter. He and Tonio busied themselves with hurried preparations for departure. And, even while making these preparations, he became aware that one of two men was always somewhere within his horizon. He had the horrible knowledge of being shadowed.

Even as they climbed the gangway of a steamer at Southampton he saw an impassive-looking man standing in the gloom, watching and watching until the steamer left the docks.

