

CHAPTER XVI

"IF she would only see me," said Horatio Flower.

"You must give her time," said Diana.

They were sitting outside the Royalty Bar which is just across the way from the Park Palace, on one of the little hills of Monte Carlo. It was a bright March morning; one of the mornings when the Mediterranean air is interinfused blue and gold. A hum of talk came through the open door of the bar; around them sounded the sharper notes of talk and laughter from the tables, umbrella-shaded like their own.

"I've given her loads of time," said Horatio.

"Four months. How much more does she want?"

"Why on earth should you expect me to know?"

Horatio made a helpless gesture. "I thought you might. I hoped, if you gave me this little opportunity of talking to you, you might be able to help me."

"I've been trying to do that all the time. Not for your sake but for Muriel's."

"But why not a bit for my sake too? I'm not really much like the fellow that married Cousin Amy in 'Locksley Hall.' I don't pretend to be much, of course, but I'm honest and sober and I think I'm proving that I love her as much as ever I did."

"That's what beats me," said Diana.

He met her frank eyes in which there always glowed a spark of mockery.

"Why?"

"The world's full of women. It reeks with them. Women of all sorts; good, bad, indifferent—Aspasia, Cleopatras, Griseldas, Madonnas—to suit all tastes. You've only got to go about and take your pick."

He acknowledged her sally with a short laugh.

"I'm not interested in women, saving your presence," he said. "Never have been. I'm interested in one woman, who happens to be Muriel. Funny, perhaps, but so it is."

Diana bent over the little table and laid her brown hand on his arm and said earnestly:

"And you really forgive her from the bottom of your heart?"

"I do. If I didn't, I couldn't reconcile it to my conscience to ask her to come back to me. If she thinks I'm going to reproach her afterwards and make her life a misery, you may tell her that I shan't. When I say a thing is wiped out, it's wiped out. I can't conceive myself being such an unutterable cad as to ask her to come back under false pretences."

Diana withdrew her hand from his arm, and, for a while, fiddled with her cocktail glass.

"I wish," she said, "you had thought of talking things over with me before."

He admitted his stupidity. On the other hand, he had not been assured of a sympathetic reception.

"You always seemed to have your knife into me," he said.

"I suppose I did. I championed Muriel through thick and thin."

"And now?"

She laughed. "I'm doing it still. But all the same, it's a pity we didn't have all this out long ago."

Indeed, this was their first meeting for many months. Horatio Flower, in the vain hope of being one day admitted to the Menton villa where Muriel lived under

the wing of her friend, Lady Dolly Valentine, had spent a bored and unhappy winter in Cannes. Diana, absorbed in the tricky fortunes of Merro, Ltd., her Renaissance furniture shop in Sloane Street, had remained in London. A sudden miracle of a sale, coinciding with a run-down condition consequent on peculiar worry and detestable weather, had sent her South in search of sunshine, fresh health and furniture. On her way to Italy to restock furniture for Merro, Ltd., she had paused at the Villa Seraphina at Menton, to stock health and sunshine for herself. The coast papers announced her arrival, for no one could slink obscurely into the villa of so reputed a hostess as Lady Dolly Valentine. Thus Horatio Flower, at Cannes, became informed of the presence of Diana Merrow at Menton. She had responded to his invitation to a more or less midway meeting at Monte Carlo.

"Anyhow," he said, "it's tremendously kind of you to come now."

"It seemed to be the only sensible thing to do."

They talked round about the matter for some time, as humans will; and then he asked her directly:

"What are my chances?"

She reflected. "Good, I think. You must remember Muriel has been dreadfully mauled, inside her—just like anyone physically mauled by a hyena. She hasn't recovered yet. She hasn't a ghost of anything like love for him left. How could she? But her self-respect, her sex-vanity—that sort of thing—have all been lacerated. She feels disfigured, if you know what I mean, and is afraid to show herself—to you, at any rate—until her wounds heal and there aren't any scars remaining. That's what I meant when I told you to give her time."

Horatio Flower made a little gesture of acceptance of the inevitable.

"You're right. You're a good sort, Diana. I wish to God we had been friends all along."

"So do I," said Diana. "You must also remember," she added, after a pause, "that all this publicity and mystery and newspaper talk doesn't do much towards the healing I've been talking about."

He looked aside, with contracted brows, and a look of pain came into his eyes.

"That's the devil of it. I'm in a far worse tangle in it all than you or Muriel could possibly conceive." A waiter hovered over the table. "Another?" She declined and rose. He paid the bill.

"I must get back."

His brows puckered in disappointment.

"Oh, why? We've only just skimmed over things. There's lots more we must talk about."

She gave hesitating reasons. She was expected back to lunch at the Villa Seraphina. Her run over to Monte Carlo in Lady Dolly's car had but an hour's shopping for excuse. He urged. She wavered. There was always the telephone, and a chance-met friend. She yielded. Between the masterfulness of Lady Dolly and the flaccidity of Muriel, life at the Villa Seraphina had its drawbacks.

"I must have food," she laughed.

"I've not heard of a famine in Monte Carlo," he said, with unwonted playfulness.

"Well, somewhere quiet, in a corner, where one can talk."

They went to Quinto's, discreet and bandless, and found their quiet corner.

"You quite see," she said, resuming the talk where it had been broken off, "that all the publicity is upsetting." She made a little impatient gesture. "Upsetting to everybody. What has happened to him? The papers are full of the missing baronet."

Full, too, of dark hints that it's a jolly good thing he's missing. Rumours of scandal going around, Not in the newspapers. No, nothing to do with women."

"I know. Idiot reports that he was a German spy during the War."

"Quite so. They are idiotic. I happen to have seen a side of Atherton that no one would suspect."

"So have I, my dear," said Horatio with a curious smile. "And, to tell you the truth, that's why I'm here waiting until I can win back Muriel."

"I suppose," said Diana, with a flash, "that was when he forced his way in to you last December in Hampshire."

Horatio laid down his fork in surprise.

"How did you know I saw him? I haven't told a human being!"

Diana smiled. "Smith told Bronson, and Bronson told me."

"I gave Smith the strictest orders. Damn the fellow!" cried Horatio.

"And Atherton gave him a ten-pound tip for letting him in."

"Smith told me that himself," said Horatio.

"There's one honest man about, anyhow," said Diana. "Look, I want to know. I've all kinds of reasons for wanting to know. What did Atherton say to you when—well, then?"

Horatio drank half a glass of wine, wiped his lips unnecessarily and looked uncomfortable.

"There are things one man may say to another that can't be repeated. We must leave it at that."

"And *that*," cried Diana across the table, "is exasperating. *That*, the fact of his having seen you, of his having promised (that's what it comes to) to

fade out of Muriel's life, of your having parted more or less friends, that is what's worrying me to death."

"Does Muriel know?"

She checked at his question. For the moment Muriel had faded into a shadow.

"I told her, of course."

"And what did she say?"

She replied impatiently:

"What does Muriel ever say? But she's a sentient being and must think—and she's a woman. I spoke about mauling. Well, it's obvious."

The simple meal progressed mechanically. Except for the mere satisfaction of physical needs, it had no significance.

"If you won't tell me what passed between you on that visit," said Diana, "you won't. And that's an end of it. But to me the idea is beastly. If you were a different kind of man, I can conceive Atherton, the man who lives in a hollow mask of respectability, precious respectability, his whole reason for living, I can conceive him offering you a bribe to let him clear out. That's grotesque. On the other hand, if he had come to you and said: 'My dear fellow, I'm utterly fed up with her and, if the divorce goes through, I'd no more think of marrying her than of cutting my throat,' you'd have kicked the worm out of the house, wouldn't you?"

"Possibly."

"Certainly. You know you would," she cried, her dark face aglow. "You would have kicked him until there was nothing left of him to kick."

Horatio pondered over the proposition. He replied:

"This is a queer world. Perhaps the queerest of all possible worlds."

"Well, as I've told you," said Diana, "this particular queerness of it is worrying me to death."

Horatio glanced at her for a second ; glanced away with a puzzled brow. His training had not been such as to enable him to appreciate quietly emotional values. Why should Diana, to his mind the most level-headed, the coldest, the most cynical of young women, be worried to death by Atherton's part in his own unhappy triangular affairs? Obviously she was unaware of Atherton's death and the supplanting brother. To her, as to Muriel, and to the world in general, the supplanter was Atherton all the time.

"If Muriel's through with him and only wants time to heal her hurts, as you tell me," he said at last, "I don't see why you, personally, need worry."

"That's what I've been telling myself for a very long time," replied Diana. "But what you've told me of your interview with him, or rather what you haven't told me—confidence between man and man, et cetera—makes me inclined to worry all the more."

"But why?" he asked somewhat insistently.

"Because," she almost whispered, "you must have noticed, as I did, the change in the man."

He made a faint gesture, half in assent, half non-committal.

"I first became aware of it," she continued, "when he met me in Paris in the winter—when Muriel was so ill. I hadn't seen him for a long time. You know I hated him for a dried-up prig. The ideal prig. A museum specimen. I only suffered him for Muriel's sake. I saw as little as I could of him. But in Paris we were thrown together—perhaps it was my doing. I don't know. Anyhow, he seemed to have been treating Muriel for the past two or three weeks pretty casually. I thought I'd bring him to hœl. I wasn't afraid of him. Muriel was. God knows why. I met him, I say, in Paris, a different man altogether, with just a kind of surface priggishness, but under-

neath it a man full of the love of life and laughter, and simple. The last time I went to see him in Paris, he had stuck a row of clockwork monkeys on his mantelpiece. Said he had bought them from an ex-British grenadier who was selling toys on the boulevards. One might just as well have thought of Atherton dressed up in a false wig and beard selling toys himself. Can a man go suddenly mad, and yet, to all outward appearances, stay perfectly sane?"

"Don't ask me," replied Horatio. "What do I know about such things?"

"Nothing, of course. I was only putting the case. But there it is. The only priggishness and callousness and cold-bloodedness about him was his attitude to Muriel. From the first moment I met him his whole idea seemed to be to cut it all out. He was utterly vile to her. Vile."

She spat the word out across the table at Horatio's stolid face; the face of ten thousand Englishmen the world over when they confront the impossible. She felt a tiny shock of exasperation as she became aware of his impenetrability. There he sat, with his well-trimmed, slightly crinkled brown hair, his florid face, his little military moustache, his obstinate chin, his blue eyes from which he seemed to have the uncanny power of withdrawing expression.

"Why don't you say something?" she cried with an impatient clap on the table. "Why don't you say 'Damn the fellow'? He behaved like a beast and a cad to Muriel."

Horatio passed his cigarette-case across to Diana. After a while he said deliberately, his eyes following a puff of smoke:

"Hasn't it occurred to you that he may have acted like an honourable man—a very honourable man—both to Muriel and to me?"

She shrugged. "Well, if you are satisfied, that's your affair. I'm not. And I'll tell you why. Look at the position as a whole."

The position as a whole, as she set it out before him, was fantastic enough, its shaky equilibrium maintained by opposing forces. The human story, as seen through her bewildered eyes, was incredible. The first postulate must be the original Atherton: young University intellectual; politician; Minister of the Crown; fine scholar of European reputation; all the time aloof, dry, valetudinarian; intolerably precise, priggish, studiously polished in manner; with some hidden un conjecturable element of sex personality that could lure away a non-temperamental woman like Muriel from a virile good-fellow of a husband. That was Atherton as she had known him before their disconcerting dinner at Fouquet's. From then onwards all her preconceived values of Atherton had been changed. A new human being with a totally different set of values, relations between the tones, the lights and shades of character, had arisen. An Atherton who no longer posed as a valetudinarian; who no longer bored you with philosophic disquisition, whose very speech was that of the ordinary man, free from pedantic phraseology; who regarded Muriel as a tiresome young woman of no account; who then, by some queer juggling, got rid of her to his own satisfaction and to that of Horatio. A man of suddenly developed or acquired qualities of graciousness, charm, manhood. And then . . .

And now, this extraordinary public scandal. The disappearance of Sir Atherton Drake. Very guarded newspaper references; very much less restrained social gossip. The man's career resembled nothing more than an incoherent moving picture invented by an idiot.

Those were the facts, undeniable. What did Horatio

make of them? Atherton an honest man? He said, rather helplessly:

"I've told you all I can."

"But not all you know. There's only one solution," said Diana. "Some form of madness. Either he was mad until I met him in Paris and then became sane—or vice versa."

The little restaurant had gradually emptied. They were alone. The bill had been paid some time before. An under-waiter hung about vaguely near the door.

"He's not the same man," she declared.

A humorous light glowed in Horatio Flower's blue eyes.

"Supposing there were two personalities, as you suggest, you found yourself rather in a fix. You detested the first, and you're very much attracted by the second."

She sat, elbows on table, chin on hands, bending forward. A flush came on her olive face.

"Suppose I am," she said defiantly, "what then? You ask me why I should worry. Now you can guess why. You and I can talk pretty nakedly, can't we? Well, I'm modern in my ideas. But there are elemental things that give me shivers. I know that by law and by the Church a man can marry his deceased wife's sister. To me it's physically horrid. You see what I mean. Well, the new Atherton has upset me altogether."

"Has he——?"

"Of course he has," Diana interrupted. "And I can't get him out of my head."

"Thanks for telling me," said Horatio, feeling like the Veronese gentleman in Shakespeare, that in any case he would be forsworn, and unconsciously manifesting his distress. "But this complicates things dreadfully."

"I don't see why it should. It rather simplifies them—as between you and Muriel; which is all that matters."

"Let us go and get a little fresh air on the subject," said Horatio.

So they walked down through the gardens, across the Casino square, and on to the lower terrace looking over the sea. But the fresh air did not aid Horatio in his dilemma. On the contrary, one touch of mistral in the breeze blew away certain cobwebs that had been gathering about his brain. To betray Buddy's confidence would doubtless go far towards his winning of Muriel and would solve Diana's perplexing problem. But an incautious word from either of them might set the police on the track of Buddy Drake, who, once caught and tried for falsifying a death register, impersonation and forgery, would undoubtedly be sentenced to a term of penal servitude. It was a risk too great to run, even though he might be tempted to consider that the happiness of four people justified him in breaking his word. The position was further complicated by the fact of Buddy's disappearance under the guise of Atherton, with very good reason, as Atherton, apparently, to disappear.

"Well?" asked Diana, after a long silence. "What has the fresh air done?"

"Nothing. It seems to me you're the only person that can do anything. If only you could get hold of him and make him explain things. He'd do it, I'm sure, if——"

"If what?"

"Hang it all, Diana," he exclaimed, "you're a woman. I'm not."

"So that's all you can tell me?"

"That's all," said Horatio.

A short while afterwards he saw her to the car

and they parted with promises to meet in the near future.

"I'll fight your battle with Muriel," she said.

She drove off, heavy-hearted, more perturbed in mind than she had ever been in her resolute young life. The beauty of the bay brought her no relief. It was an aching blue that intensified the ache in her soul.

