

## CHAPTER XVII

FOR the opportunity of questioning him, getting at the heart of his secret, had presented itself and she had let it slip.

It had come a couple of months before.

It was a dreary afternoon of January rain. She stood among her show-room stock of Italian furniture, painted beds, commodes, *cassone*, chimney-pieces, della Robbia plaques, and looked through the plate-glass window at the dripping umbrellas and streaming pavements and wet cars glistening in the conflicting lights of the broad thoroughfare. Not a customer, endowed with sanity, at any rate, to be expected at such a time. Her salesman was having his tea in a grubby store-room at the back. Her secretary was engaged in the office over accounts, possibly with a cup of tea beside her. Diana herself was on duty. The furniture of a far-past epoch, crammed crudely together, in spite of her peculiar talent for arrangement, oppressed her with a sense of forlorn homelessness. Each piece in its way was good; subtly placed in harmonious surroundings it would shyly proclaim itself a thing of beauty. When jammed together the pieces had ceased to be shy. They quarrelled like a lot of nerve-ridden women herded in seclusion. For no justifiable reason she felt herself to be one of them.

She longed for the closing-hour when she would slip round to her little flat close by, and sit and read a book and sip a Martini and smoke and luxuriate in

its restful jumble of the comfort of all the styles. Not a stiff bit of preciousness anywhere; just snugness, soft chairs, cushions, a blazing fire, a welcoming array of books—any old books with no pretension to binding—in fitted bookcases, and the dozen or so pictures she loved. There would also be a dog for company.

Mr. Pilkington, the salesman, was taking an unconscionable time over his tea. He was the kind of earnest, sallow man to whom his tea was a materialized sacrament. For relaxation he played the oboe in an amateur orchestral society somewhere near the Crystal Palace. As a human being Diana had little use for him. As a furniture expert and authoritative salesman he was invaluable. When would the fool finish his uninspiring meal and relieve her, so that she could get away from the stark unreality of this death-like shop?

And it rained and it rained outside—the rain beat against the plate-glass windows so that they streamed, and the outer world became a dim, prismatic blur.

Suddenly the shop door burst open and a man came in. His coat glistened with raindrops and water dripped from the turned-down brim of his hat. She made a step forward, then halted suddenly as their eyes met. It was Buddy. He took off his hat, looked at it with a short laugh.

“I’m afraid to put it down anywhere. It’ll spoil things. I’ll throw it on the mat. How are you, Diana?”

She took his hand mechanically. He laughed.

“Forgive my breaking in like this. Especially on such a beast of an evening. I’d no idea one could get so wet just walking down Sloane Street.”

“Why should you walk in the rain?” she asked. “It doesn’t seem to fit in with your general habits.”

"My general habits have changed considerably the last few weeks."

"So I've been given to understand," she said coldly.

He looked around him at the cheerless masterpieces of painted furniture, and glanced at her with a whimsical smile.

"Won't you ask me to sit down? If I take off my coat and fold it up wet side inwards, and put my hat on it and stick it on the floor, there'll be no danger of spoiling anything, and I can sit on a chair."

She said in an even voice :

"I don't particularly want to talk to you, but if you insist——"

"I do insist, Diana," he said, taking off his coat. "It's my last chance of seeing you for God knows how long."

There was that in his eyes which softened a little the heart which she had been at such pains, since their last interview, to harden against him.

"We can't talk in the shop. It would be idiotic. Besides, Mr. Pilkington, the salesman, will be here in a minute. I'll turn Miss Taylor out of the office."

The secretary, not unaccustomed to be dispossessed when the Head and a Wealthy Customer desired private conclave, took her books and fountain-pen to the desk at the back of the shop, and Diana and Buddy entered the comfortless little room. It was furnished with a desk and a swivel-chair behind it, and in front of it a stiff arm-chair for the customer. Diana seated herself in the swivel-chair. Buddy laughed again.

"I've come to see Diana, not the Managing Director of Merro, Ltd." He pushed a basket of papers aside and sat on a corner of the table. He tipped up the shade of the reading-lamp and looked at her in its full

light and, before she had time to make her instinctive action of indignant protest, he cried:

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever known!"

She pulled the shade down angrily.

"If you talk like that, you must go."

"I'll have to go in a few minutes, anyway," he said. "And go for good."

"So much the better," she said, leaning back and looking at him defiantly, her face now in shadow. "But I hope it is for good. Do you remember the last words you said to me?"

"Perfectly well. I asked you to forget that such a damned fool as I ever existed. You said you would. Have you?"

She scoffed. "Practically. Especially since I found out you had gone down to Newstead and bargained with Horatio Flower over Muriel."

Buddy started, and asked incredulously:

"He told you?"

"No."

She explained impatiently the Smith-Bronson channel of information.

"I could kill the fellow," cried Buddy, bringing his fist down on the desk. "I gave him ten pounds to keep his mouth shut."

"I can quite understand your doing all kinds of dirty things. I could forgive you for lots of them. But for bargaining with Horatio I'll never forgive you until I'm dead."

Buddy slipped from the desk and walked a pace or two and rubbed his head. It was an unexpected blow, which for a moment sent him staggering.

"I'm sorry you take it that way," he said in a low voice. "As a matter of fact, my seeing Horatio was one of the finest things I've done in my rotten life."

Her body swayed in scornful protest.

"What do you mean? Your rotten life—that I'll agree to. But a fine action? What was it? Face the facts. A man brings an action for divorce against his wife, naming you as co-respondent—an undefendable case. You go and see him, bargain with him to let you off. Horatio's not a fool. He must have his price—there are two sides to a bargain. Oh, no! God forgive you for thinking I was thinking of it! Not money. Horatio would have killed you on sight if you had suggested such a thing. But there was a price. What was it? Dishonour, something mean—unspeakable."

She was staring at him, sitting bolt upright in the chair, the palms of her hands on the table. He raised a hand.

"There was a price, of course. But it was honourable—as far as a hunted devil like me can be honourable. And it was nothing mean. It was something big. Very big. Unspeakable?" He smiled warily. "Perhaps. But in a different sense of the word from yours."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You're talking in riddles. How on earth do you expect me to understand?"

He replied:

"I expect nothing. It wasn't I who brought up the subject, was it?" He sat down in the customer's chair and lit a cigarette. "I came in because I had to. I couldn't leave England for ever without seeing you to bid you good-bye. I was also crazy enough to think I might carry away some hope with me."

"What hope, my dear Atherton?"

"That you might accept—what shall I say?—my heart, a bit of my heart, as a hostage—in pawn, if you like—to redeem it some day when I've made good."

The note of humility and truth in the man's voice smote her. She caught her breath at queer vibrations through her body. Scarcely knowing what she did, she rose and went round to him and touched his shoulder.

"I wish I could understand. You've changed so much. You're no longer the same person."

"Perhaps not," he said, looking up with pain in his eyes. "I used to be a sham and now I'm real. Or the other way about? God knows."

"But there's always Muriel," she said.

"Yes," he replied hopelessly. "There's always Muriel. Was—not is. Nor ever will be. Well, I must be going. I've one or two things to do and a train to catch. A train to America."

"Now?" she asked incredulously.

"Now. You needn't tell anybody. I'd rather no one knew I'd slipped in this afternoon. That's why I dismissed my taxi at the top of Sloane Street and walked here through the rain. Sir Atherton Drake, Baronet, is leaving England under a cloud."

She stared aghast. Such a contingency had not occurred to her in her wildest speculations on the strange messages concerning him in the personal column of *The Times*; especially the one menacing set of capitals: "SIR ATHERTON DRAKE." In her speculations, too, on his disappearance from the ken of the perplexed Bronsons, on the sudden paying off with a small fortune of the same Bronsons through an impersonal firm of lawyers and the shutting up of the Park Lane flat.

She questioned him. He answered as evasively as he could. He had got mixed up with a set of nasty, dangerous people. It had been a question of blackmail, of course. Now conditions had changed. The blackmail was at an end. They were going to strike and strike quick.

"If it's blackmail," she flashed, "why don't you stand up against them in court?"

"They strike in the dark—and I'm not altogether an innocent lamb. I'm utterly helpless." He laughed somewhat harshly. "God! If I could only tell you how grotesquely helpless I am!"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know that the most unlikely people have gone crash in their time. But they've nearly always been mixed up in enormous financial schemes—Jabez Balfour, Whitaker Wright, and so on. But you?" She looked at him sharply. "It isn't finance, is it?"

"Good Lord, no!" smiled Buddy, to whom all financial transactions beyond the simplest buying and selling were dark mysteries. And, as she seemed reassured on the point, he grew serious and added, "And it has nothing to do with personal morality either. All said and done, I've led a pretty clean life. If I hadn't, I shouldn't be here."

She sighed. There was something about the man that called to her and found reluctant response.

She said, as she had said and thought before, as she was to say and think many times afterwards:

"If I didn't know you were Atherton Drake, I should take you for some one quite different. You don't seem to think the same thoughts. You don't speak the same language."

For a moment he stood like a man whose heart is beating hard. She was not to know that he was fighting a great temptation; not to know that the question, "Why not? Why not?" was racking his brain.

Presently he turned from her with a helpless movement, and picked up the greatcoat and hat which he had brought in from the shop.

"I oughtn't to have come in and worried you. But

when a man loves a woman, and doesn't know whether he'll ever see her again, he may be forgiven for making a fool of himself."

He shook himself into his coat.

"Good-bye, my dear. This is the end of it. Think as well of me as you can."

She stood, weak and wondering. Suddenly his arm was around her, his lips on hers, and as suddenly he released her and strode to the office door.

She recovered quickly. Her balanced sense of the fitness of things made her cry arrestingly:

"Atherton!"

He paused, his hand on the door-handle.

"This is a business establishment," she said in a voice pitched higher than she was aware of. "I must see you out politely."

He held the door open for her to pass through. They entered the shop. At the desk, the secretary made show of adding up figures in books. Mr. Pilkington, the salesman, was talking to a vague, scrubby man in a bowler hat. Diana accompanied Buddy across the place to the shop door.

"Good-bye," she said, in conventional tones.

"Good-bye, Miss Merrow." He paused, added in a quick whisper, "If you want to give me a crumb of comfort, do use that dressing-case I sent you for Christmas from Southport."

He smiled, waved a hand and fled into the rain, while she stood looking stupidly through the glass door.

Mr. Pilkington, seeing her disengaged, came down the shop followed by the scrubby man.

"This, Miss Merrow," he said, "is Mr. Marten of Tillotson's."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Merrow," said Mr. Marten, politely taking off his hat. "I was just



asking Mr. Pilkington if you'd be interested in a Chinese-Venetian corner-cupboard we've got the refusal of. It's out of our line, but we could get it reasonably for you on commission."

She looked through the man, totally devoid, for the moment, of interest in corner-cupboards. She scarcely heard him as he praised the piece. It had a pedigree. It was of the fine period; a museum bit. Normally she prided herself on her knowledge and appreciation of this pretty, bastard Chinoiserie-Renaissance art, and she would have pricked up attentive ears to a proposition on the subject coming from a firm of Tillotson's reputation. But now she was blind to the importance of this bit of wood painted in flat colours, light yellow and green most likely. She felt that her mind was away outside, wandering confusedly, if not insanely, through the pouring rain, following a wraith, and seeking it knew not what.

"Here are some photographs," said Mr. Marten.

"I think it might be worth considering, Miss Merrow," said Mr. Pilkington in the cold, unenthusiastic tone of the prospective buyer, so different from his salesman's persuasive voice.

"Of course it is," she said irritably. "Go and consider it. Look at it and tell me about it. Good evening, Mr. Marten."

She retreated into the office, angrily conscious of strange happenings. Why should her mind go wandering through the rain? Why should it give signs and tokens of wanderings over the winter seas? When would she be able to grip it tight and stop it from wandering further? She passed her hand across her eyes and called herself a fool.

In a corner of the office, behind the desk, stood the dressing-case in its brown canvas cover. It had been dumped by a messenger one day after her departure

from the shop; the secretary had signed the man's receipt form. Except for the label bearing the name of the Southport firm who had sold the bag, and the imprint of the manufacturers, there had been nothing to tell her whence it came. She wrote to Southport. The firm replied that an unknown customer had purchased the case and given instructions as to delivery; and, as he had paid in cash and not by cheque, it was impossible to trace him. She had exhausted herself in futile conjectures as to the donor. There was not an acquaintance, male or female, between whom and Southport she could find any connecting link. Atherton never even flitted across the background of her thoughts. The dressing-case had remained a mystery.

Mr. Pilkington, consulted, said darkly:

"It may possibly be a try-on. Such things happen in business. I wouldn't touch it if I were you."

So Diana hadn't touched it, although the feminine and the lover of beauty within her were grievously tempted.

And now . . . now she realized it had come from Atherton, the new, incomprehensible incarnation of an Atherton of the past.

On two previous occasions Atherton had made her a present; once a Louis XV snuffbox, once a modest vanity-case (chosen by Muriel); and each gift had been accompanied by a visiting card, on which he had stiffly written: "For Diana Merrow, with kindest regards." His niggard instincts and his cold formality, which Muriel accepted humbly as eternal elements in his nature, like the mist and mud in outside nature, had ever goaded her to fury. Silly love for her helpless sister had compelled loyalty. But between Atherton and herself there had always existed an armed neutrality; at times broken, on her side, by winged taunts, arrows of scorn.

And until that meeting in the lounge of the Plaza-Athénée in Paris, her barbs had fallen blunted against the impenetrable armour of his conscious superiority. In Paris she had found, to her surprise, then to her amusement, a changed man. She had misjudged him all the time. Treat him humanly and he became human; charmingly, frankly human when he forgot himself. But there were times when he seemed to remember and to put on the whole armour of self-righteousness; and then she hated him again.

She must get out of the shop. She must be alone by a fireside, with the comforts and intimacies of her life around her, and think. At any rate she must escape from any smug fool who might come and bore her with arguments over these dead and dreadful contraptions of wood wherewith she was surrounded, and which, in her present nervous state, threatened to become a nightmare.

"Thank God," she breathed, as the taxi stopped at the door of her Mansions and the hall-porter crossed the wet pavement and took charge of the dressing-case.

The neat, smiling little maid welcomed her. Her name was Fanny Pratt. A great lion Pekingese, wide-boned, square-headed, spectacled like a mandarin, bow-legged in authoritative bone, draped in majestic furs and feathers, autocratic feathers two inches beyond his toes, his tail like a cascading oriflamme (for oriflamme see Macaulay's poem), his eyes like the dancing eyes of little Chinese devils, and his nose somehow prominently buried within his inner, but yet startling consciousness, welcomed her, too, with the fury of the Oriental who lets himself go. His name was Thunder.

She sat and received his first transport in her arms,

as he stuck his head under her chin uttering strange little noises. Then he lay back and, seraphically smiling, enjoyed the rubbing of his thick silky front and her foolish words of endearment. The ceremony over, he jumped to the ground, shook himself and stood gazing at her in inquiry, as who should say :

“ Now, what have you been doing with this beastly day? Tell me all about it.”

And she looked at him rather tearfully and said :

“ I'm afraid you wouldn't understand, old man. I'm none too clear about it myself.”

The maid entered. “ Will you have tea or a cocktail, miss? ”

Diana answered recklessly :

“ Both.”

Thunder had a pleasant meal.

The next day she interested herself in the Chino-Venetian corner-cupboard. Mr. Marten had not exaggerated its beauty and rarity. She bought it at a reasonable price. A week afterwards, knowing her market, she sold it at a very great profit.

Other opportunities for lucrative deals presented themselves in the weeks that followed, each attended by its excitement of suspense, its thrill of accomplishment ; so that it was only when she was alone with Thunder, and when, stretched supine, chin on feathery paws, he looked up at her half in mockery, half in sympathy out of his inscrutable eyes, that she allowed herself to think of the astonishing man whose disappearance had become a newspaper and social sensation.

Every one agreed that Sir Atherton Drake had not departed from England without leaving an address behind him, merely for the sake of his health. Every one seemed to know that inquiries as to his late move-

ments in the country, and his present whereabouts were being made by high official powers. Even Diana herself learned that. Bronson called at the shop one day in February. Although relieved of material cares through the agency of Mr. Edgar Fry, Sir Atherton's affairs caused him sleepless nights of anxiety. Only lately a Scotland Yard inspector had come and questioned him, the last man, he sighed, that could give any useful information. He had not set eyes on Sir Atherton since the middle of December. All communication between them had been made through Professor Gaffarelli, his new secretary. The inspector said they had reason to believe Sir Atherton and the Professor were in America. Bronson didn't know. How could he know? Should Miss Merrow ever hear from Sir Atherton, would she send him word—just a word saying that Sir Atherton was alive and well? More he could not ask, seeing that the police seemed to look to him for particular information. Diana promised, and dismissed a saddened Bronson with such comforting platitudes as lay in her power.

Then she learned that beneath rumour lay sinister and disturbing fact.

Early in March she received a post-card from New York. The address was typed. On the blank side there was nothing but a rough sketch of a mantelpiece on which was ranged a set of little monkeys. The only monkey-ridden mantelpiece she had ever beheld was that in Atherton's Paris hotel sitting-room.

She wired to Bronson to come and see her at the flat.

"I have news, Bronson," she said. "Sir Atherton is well. That's all I can tell you."

He expressed his thanks. But to give him news had not been the main reason for her summons. She bade him sit. Bronson knew his world. He sat on the

indicated chair and passed a reassuring hand over the head of a suspicious Thunder.

"This is between ourselves, Bronson, absolutely private and confidential," she said earnestly. "What I say to you, and what you say to me, doesn't go outside this room."

"That is so, miss."

She showed him the post-card drawing.

"Can you imagine Sir Atherton sending anyone such a message?"

He stared at it open-mouthed, and shook his head.

"Sir Atherton didn't send that."

"He did. I know of my own certain knowledge that he did."

"But Sir Atherton couldn't draw, miss. I know he couldn't!"

She paused at the man's emphatic statement. Atherton could draw. She remembered one evening in Paris when they had dined and gone to a theatre together. In the restaurant he had drawn on a pad, a *bloc-notes* borrowed from the *maître d'hôtel*, a vigorous caricature of a fat, bestial man sitting alone a few tables off. The same hand had dashed off the monkeys.

"But how do you know?" she asked insistently.

"I've often heard him say so to his friends. In fact, miss, it was a sort of pet grievance with him that he couldn't draw."

He went on giving instances recalled by his own memory from the long past of years. Childish attempts to set down his ideas graphically for the information of architects. An argument once at his dinner-table with some learned friend over a group of statuary. As far as Bronson could remember, the gentleman said the legs went one way, Sir Atherton said the other. Sir Atherton called for pencil and paper. He made a

few hopeless marks, then crumpled it up angrily with the exclamation, "Good God, if only I could draw!"

"Why, miss," said Bronson with a smile, "I've been with Sir Atherton since he was a tiny boy. I've known him better than his own father and mother. I remember that was one of the reasons, when they were both at school, that he was so jealous of his brother, poor Mr. Brotherton—and he so much more brilliant!—that Mr. Brotherton could draw and he couldn't."

Diana suddenly felt as though something had hit her somewhere, in some vital spot. She turned faint. She was conscious of growing white. Curious shivers crept up her brow and under her hair. She gripped the corded edges of the divan on which she sat. She seemed to be staring down into some wild psychological abyss. Vague fragments of modern scientific jargon picked up in casual reading hurtled through her distracted mind. Twin affinity. Sub-conscious change of identity. Psycho-analysis—a futile, meaningless word, worrying her brain.

She recovered herself with a great effort; and rose to put coals on the fire. Bronson sprang to his feet and respectfully took the scoop from her hand. Thus the draughtsmanship thread was broken as far, she hoped, as Bronson was concerned. She had learned far more than she had thought of learning. When they were reseated she asked him the question that originally was in her mind. Had Bronson noticed any great change of late in Sir Atherton's general conduct and character?

Said the perfect old servant who had passed his life in loyal service to the family of Drake:

"It's not for me, miss, to criticize Sir Atherton. But there have been changes; very curious changes.

One would say, almost, that he was a different man."

Diana nodded assent. "And what would you put the difference down to?"

"Possibly this trouble that he seemed to be in. He must have seen it coming for a long time. And then, miss, as I've been thinking it over, he never seemed to be the same man since poor Mr. Brotherton's death. There was no love lost between them, I know. But when Mr. Brotherton died on his hands, as it were, all sudden like, it gave Sir Atherton a great shock. He became softer, more human-like, if you know what I mean, miss."

"I think I know exactly what you mean, Bronson," said Diana.

"If I'm not taking too great a liberty, miss," Bronson went on, "I've always thought that something must have been said between the two brothers that laid its mark on Sir Atherton."

"How strange," said Diana. "And you can almost definitely date the change in Sir Atherton from the night of Mr. Brotherton's death?"

"Humanly speaking, I think I can," said Bronson.

"Well, there's nothing left but to see what happens," said Diana.

Bronson rose and thanked her for considerate kindness. Attached as he had been throughout all his adult life to Sir Atherton's person, he was bound to him by ties that had the strength of blood brotherhood. In the old Scottish clans there used to be some sort of ceremony with a dirk to establish such a relationship. In his respectful and unimaginative language he gave Diana to understand that there was a similar bond between him and Atherton.

"As for this disgrace that has fallen upon him, I can't understand it. I'd give every penny I have, miss, to know the truth."



Diana summoned a smile. "And I'd give a great deal too, Bronson."

For many days the two irreconcilable Athertons alternated before her vision in an inchoate phantasmagoria. She was tempted to consult some expert psychologist, putting before him a hypothetical case.

Could a man, already worn by anxiety and disease, suddenly, under the influence of sudden shock—the shock being the dramatic death under his eyes of a twin brother—change his character, almost basically change it; change radically from an artificial, cold, possibly cruel, none too moral Jekyll, into a careless, casual, and all too appealingly human Hyde?

Convention forbade so absurd an adventure. But that was her distracting problem. The worry of it, combined with what, woman-like, she thought might be a compensating balance of work, brought about a nervous breakdown. The work, however, had borne fruit in fortune. The weather was fit only for the fattest and greasiest of citizens, Arctic dogs and golf champions. Diana's doctor had bundled her off South to the sunshine.

Then she had arrived in Menton, a spent woman.

A spent woman she had gone to Monte Carlo to meet Horatio Flower, in the hope—proved vain—of getting from him the key to the mind-darkening imbroglio of which she was sure he held sole possession.

As she drove back to Menton, two key phrases of that talk between the two men, two that were one and the same, rang through her head. "The finest thing"—or whatever the exact words were—"I've ever done in my rotten life" . . . " . . . he acted like an honourable man, a very honourable man."

And she had had it in her power (she knew in the

maddened depths of her that she had had it in her power) that last night in January, had she only held him when he had thrown his arm about her, either in gift or surrender, to get at the whole heart of his mystery.

"Where have you been all this time?" asked Muriel when she reappeared at the Villa Seraphina.

"With Horatio, if you want to know. I think," she said, stamping her foot in nervous exasperation, "you're the damnedest little fool God ever allowed to crawl on the face of the earth."

Muriel approached her, in her mild, disarming way, with a queer little smile.

"I'm beginning to think so myself, darling."

