

## CHAPTER XVIII

LADY DOLLY VALENTINE was a widow in her early fifties. She had three children, a son in the Indian Army, a son in the Navy, and a young daughter at school in England. She was fair, florid, and successful in keeping her figure within comely bounds, and, as far as her loneliness allowed, was a cheerful, happy and company-loving woman. Muriel and Diana, first cousins of her late husband, she had known from childhood and, to a certain extent, had mothered them. For their own mother, a woman of vehement passions, had deserted them when they were very young, leaving them to the law-ordained custody of a gentle and inefficient father, and, repenting fervently after the manner of mediæval ladies of her type, was expiating her sins in the eternal seclusion of a convent in Spain. She had chosen this country because her mother had been pure Spanish.

The only heritage she had left her daughters was the touch of Spain in their blood which showed itself, in diverse ways, in their characters. The fire, said Lady Dolly, she had left to the younger Diana; the lack of control to Muriel, who had also inherited her father's mild scholarly distaste for over-exertion both of will and bodily muscle. He had been a man of independent means and of a status in the literary world assured by his editorship for many years of a learned monthly journal.

Thus had he come into touch with the brilliant

young scholar, Atherton Drake. As a consequence of their intellectual friendship he had accepted a week-end invitation to Newstead Park, Sir Atherton Drake's newly acquired country residence, and had taken with him his elder and favourite daughter, Muriel, who to some extent shared his literary tastes and acted, on occasion, as his secretary. It was at a small, formal dinner-party given in their honour to such neighbours as Atherton was bound, some time or other, to entertain, that Muriel first met Horatio Flower. The latter fell in love with her dark, languid beauty and, before a couple of months were up, she found herself carried off her feet and married to him and enthroned as mistress in the New Forest home of this honest, not very intellectual, stag-hunting county gentleman.

Then Mr. Merrow had died, passing away as gently and as unobtrusively as he had lived.

Diana lived with a woman friend, had a disastrous girlish love affair with an unpleasant man about town, by the name of Guy Rickham who eventually, by the dotting of i's and the crossing of t's, made it clear to her ingenuous mind that of all propositions he could suggest for their immediate or future happiness marriage was the most absurdly impossible, and then, after a period of deeply resented heartache, fiercely convinced herself that men were deceivers ever, and that she, for her part, would never more have anything to do with any of them.

And then, like some sort of fungoid growth, according to her mind, had sprouted and developed this unholy intimacy between Muriel and her neighbour, Sir Atherton Drake. To understand it she had to use her keen intelligence and suppress instinct. She disliked both men. Horatio Flower was a man of the same florid male type as Guy Rickham, who had set her young chastity flaming fiercely white. Atherton

was a dry, formal pedant ; more or less the copy of her father, with all the sweet, foolish, human lovable-ness frozen out of him. She was aware that Horatio, guessing her antipathy, made few overtures of friendship. She was aware, too, that Atherton expressed in his exquisitely polite, cold manner his lack of interest in so full-blooded and non-intellectual a person as herself.

But she had a mad, silly love for Muriel. For as long as she could remember she had stood between Fate and Muriel's ineffectuality. She had protected her, although eighteen months her junior, in a million trivial ways ; in the million trivialities that have no place in a man's boyish life, but loom so important in girlish childhood and early womanhood. Trivial things such as :

" Darling, my new pink slippers. Somebody spilt something over them. They're ruined."

" Rot. It'll all come out with Oidono."

" But how do you put it on, darling ? "

And " darling," impatient, practical, efficient, puts it on after the expenditure of much thought and care, and throws the slippers on to the bed of the helplessly expectant little nymph.

Or again, a garden party :

" Darling, he's coming to meet me behind the rhododendrons."

" I wouldn't be seen dead with the pie-faced little fool."

" Oh, darling, do be kind. He's so nice. Just keep *cave* for five minutes. His mother's a terror. A perfect Gorgon. Darling—do."

And Diana stands in hiding, her eyes upon the Gorgon mother, while fifteen-year-old Muriel lures her pie-faced coeval into barren osculation, until at her cry of " Miaow ! "—the prearranged signal—the guilty

pair separate and melt into the landscape, and the garden party proceeds in its austere, elderly way.

Or again, very much later, very much more important: the night before Muriel's wedding, she was sitting on the edge of Muriel's bed. Muriel, with her oval Madonna face and appealing Madonna eyes, had claimed her final help. And Diana had smothered her with kisses by way of extinguishing inextinguishable laughter which rioted through her heart and brain.

"You're the most impossible child! How could you think of such a thing?"

There seemed, all their lives, to be no conceivable situation, however delicate, in which Muriel had not turned to her for guidance and support.

Since Diana's arrival in Menton the three women, sometimes in conclave, sometimes in combinations of pairs, had discussed Muriel's predicament. They met that afternoon, when Diana brought the report of her interview with Horatio, in full conclave.

The three tall French windows leading on to the terrace that commanded a westward view over the Bay were closed against the chill, post-sunset air. The glow of the sunset still lingered and crept, dark rose and gold, into the great drawing-room and touched the silver on the abandoned tea-table. At the far end of the room a wood fire burned cheerfully. The end of March in the South of France is not flaming mid-summer. It is cold of evenings, and the cosiness of warmth is grateful.

Midway, in the centre of the room, sat the conclave. Muriel, with the air of a patient surrendering her case to eminent specialists, reclined on a couch listening, and with great mournful eyes regarding each of the two other women in turn as they spoke. Now, that

health in its physical perfection had returned to her, she was a beautiful woman and, in her sinuous and almost declaratory feminine way, a woman attractive to the majority of men. Yet her face was one not of common allurements; there was intellectuality in the broad brows and the wide set of the eyes, and spirituality in the delicate contour of cheeks and chin. She made much of this refinement of feature. In itself it proclaimed distaste for coarser fibres in humanity such as those which were paramount in her husband's nature. She had declared many times to Diana:

"Horatio loves me for my body; Atherton for my mind."

She did not now, however, put forward this proposition to her two companions who were sitting close by. But Diana referred to it.

"When you used to talk about the grosser element in Horatio's love for you, I used to believe it, like a fool. Now I don't. I've changed my mind about him altogether."

"I think," said Lady Dolly, in her comfortable, matter-of-fact way, "you've got a chance which is given to one woman in a million. You kicked over the traces. You managed to keep clear—God knows how—of any very blatant scandal. You've got rid of a scoundrel. Apart from his having to fly the country with the police after him, didn't he do as mean a thing as a man could do, go and beg your husband to let him off the divorce proceedings? And with all that, now you have a real fine fellow like Horatio dying to take you back—no questions asked. What about it?"

Muriel sighed. "You're both beautifully right. I confessed a little while ago to Diana that I'd been a fool."

"And I can tell him," asked Diana, "that he can come and see you any time he likes?"

"Yes," said Muriel with a faint flush. "I think now I'd like to see him."

"That's sense at last," said Diana, lighting a cigarette.

"You'll have to be on your guard, my dear," said Lady Dolly, "lest Atherton pops up again. Not now—but in two years, five years, ten years' time."

Muriel swung her legs from the sofa and sat up. She bent forward, her palms on the seat each side of her.

"He'll never do that. There's no longer any Atherton—at any rate the man I used to know. I'll tell you two something I've never told you before, because you might think I was going mad. I believe Atherton's dead—or disappeared—months ago. Before I was taken ill in Paris."

Diana felt the same cold grip close round her as she had felt but a little while before, during her talk with Bronson. She was glad of the deepening twilight. She tried to steady her voice.

"What do you mean?"

Muriel bent forward and held out an arresting finger.

"The man who came to see me in the nursing-home in Paris wasn't Atherton."

Lady Dolly broke into a short laugh.

"Who was it, then?"

"How do I know?"

"Why didn't you say so at once?"

"I was so ill and weak that I took it for granted it was he. But he struck me as strange—his way of speaking. Oh, it took me a long time, weeks, putting all sorts of things together, to get the awful idea fixed in my head. Things he had said to me. 'Let it go at that,' I remember. Atherton never talked slangily.

Then, when he left me, he bent down and kissed me on the cheek. At the time I was so pleased. Afterwards I felt sure that Atherton couldn't have done such a thing. He had a horror of sick people. I remembered that once I came from the dentist's, feeling a bit done up and miserable—possibly with a trace of some antiseptic about me. He wouldn't let me go near him—grew white and faint and had to take drops."

She paused. Diana cried in a queer voice :

"Go on. Tell us more. You must have deeper reasons. There's a difference between a live woman smelling of creosote and a woman just snatched out of the jaws of death."

"He didn't look the same, darling. I can't explain. And then, his hand was so firm and strong."

"Good God!" cried Diana, starting up. "What a fool I've been! Atherton's hands were cold and clammy. This man's were dry and strong."

She turned to Muriel with an apparently irrelevant question which she had to repeat. Could Atherton draw? Could he sketch? Muriel shook an uncomprehending head. No. In her own way she confirmed Bronson's story. Diana exclaimed rather wildly :

"The child's right. It all hangs together. It isn't that Atherton's changed. The man isn't Atherton at all. He's somebody else. His double."

Lady Dolly rose and looked from one to the other of the two drawn faces.

"Are the pair of you going crazy? What's it all about? For God's sake talk sense, one of you." She crossed the room and switched on the light. Muriel made a quick move of protest. "I don't care whether you like it or not. At any rate we can see each other in the clear light of reason. How could Atherton have a double?"

"Atherton," said Diana, very pale, giddily conscious of being on the verge of the incredible, "had a twin brother who died in the flat. His death was reported in *The Times*. We all saw it. Bronson told me that when they were young they were almost indistinguishable. And he told me that the dead man, Brotherton Drake, might have been Atherton himself. And," she said slowly, after a slight pause, "the change in Atherton dates from the night of his brother's death."

Cold wings seemed to beat, through the great room above the heads of the three women.

"But what are we to make of it all?" asked Lady Dolly.

"God knows," said Diana. "God, and Horatio Flower."

"Horatio!" cried Muriel.

"Of course. Didn't he tell me that Atherton—or the man we call Atherton—acted in a noble, honourable, to listen to him one would gather it was a fantastically quixotic, way, when he saw him in Hampshire?"

"But who is the man masquerading as Atherton Drake?"

"His twin, Brotherton. How, I don't know. Lend me the car now, Dolly. I'll go over to Cannes."

"Why not telephone him to come here?" Muriel suggested, with characteristic indolence.

"Because it will take an hour or two to get him on the telephone, and a couple of hours more for him to get here. Quicker to go to Cannes and find him. That'll be simple."

Muriel drew herself up, very erect.

"If you go, I'll go with you."

"And I too," said Lady Dolly. "If I'm not with you, none of you will think of dinner."

Horatio was easily found. He had taken a small



furnished villa on the Californie for the season. Smith and a maid and a cook ministered to his comfort. The domesticated English country squire regards hotels more as the sporadic caravanserais of travel than as permanent resting-places. His honest instincts revolt against their spurious palatiality; and hostelries of a second order do not provide for many comfortable habits. Horatio was found at home, reading *The Times*.

He looked up from his paper as the purring of a car, the front door bell, a whispered colloquy in the hall, met his ear. He laid it down and sprang to his feet when Smith, with a scared face, announced his visitors.

"It's all right," he said, cutting short the man's excuses. "I saw Miss Merrow this morning."

He greeted them in the order in which they entered. There was a light in his eyes.

"My dear Dolly, what a pleasure to see you once more. Diana." He held out both hands to Muriel. "My dear, where will you sit?" He led her to an arm-chair. "You're well again? You're looking so. Thanks to you, Dolly."

He placed chairs for the other two women, apologizing for their discomfort. The luxuries of the appurtenances of little French villas furnished for letting purposes were calculated to a nicety. The French were an exact people. He laughed and his face lit up. Diana reproached herself bitterly for the foolish things she had thought and said about him. How a woman could have left him for the old, unspeakable Atherton, she was at a loss to comprehend.

"I suppose you're dying to know why we're all here," she said in her frank way.

"I was hoping it was a result of our talk to-day. Is it, Muriel?"

She flushed. "Perhaps. Diana has told me all you said."

"Then, my dear,"—he made an involuntary step towards her—"you consent?"

"That's not the question for the moment, Horatio," said Lady Dolly. "If you and Muriel want to talk things over, you must do it by yourselves. Diana and I don't want to listen to you. There's some decency left in modern life."

"We've come—or rather, I've come and brought Dolly and Muriel—to clear the ground once and for all. It's not a pleasant subject, I know. But we've got to talk of Atherton first."

He stiffened. "I see no reason. He has disappeared from our lives. That's quite enough. Not only from our lives—but—er—generally."

"He's dead," said Diana. "And you know it."

"Dead? When?" he asked, startled, his mind following the actual man that had vanished.

"He died before the man, his twin brother, came to see you."

He passed his hands over his eyes, somewhat staggered. He looked at her, deep lines across his forehead.

"How do you know that? If you knew, why didn't you tell me this morning?"

"I wasn't sure then. I tried to get it out of you. But you were lying low and saying nothing. You had given him your sacred promise, I suppose, to say nothing. Oh, I'm not being sarcastic," she cried, as he made an impatient gesture. "I'm stating a fact. I'm not a fool—not now, at any rate. Well, I wasn't sure this morning; but I was sure when I talked this afternoon to Muriel. The man she saw in Paris wasn't Atherton. She realizes it. Then I *was* sure." She rose and took him by the lapels of his coat. "You

see, your knowledge is common property. You're released from your promise. Aren't you?"

He looked down on her from his burly height.

"I suppose I am," he admitted.

"Atherton's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"And the man you saw is his twin, Brotherton?"

"Yes."

Muriel rose to her feet with a curious sinuous softness.

"All this has been worrying me for months," she said, facing him. "If you don't make everything absolutely clear now, I'd better go home."

"And if I do?"

"Then we can talk things over—by ourselves—as Dolly suggested."

"Very well. But for God's sake sit down, both of you." And when they had done so, he began: "Well. It was like this . . ." And he told the preposterous story to the three staring and silent women.

"But what induced him to go to you, in the first place?" asked Lady Dolly.

"He saw me in the road, breaking in a beast of a colt. Fond of horses and that sort of thing. Liked the look of me—so came and made a clean breast of it. That's why I told you he acted honourably. He's a damned fine fellow, is Brotherton Drake. Sort of man one loves at first sight. I did—at least, after he had nearly broken my arm and proved to me who he was."

Muriel sighed. "But why—why didn't he come and tell me?"

"Ask him, my dear," said Horatio. "He was going about under the peril of penal servitude and you had no particular reason to be kind and tender to him if you knew. You wouldn't have been, would you?"

"I might, and then again I mightn't. How is one to know?"

"Well, that's honest, at any rate," said Lady Dolly, rising. "There's one point we must clear up before we go. Is it the real Atherton, or the bogus Atherton, the new one, that is wanted by the police for the mysterious offences?"

"The dead Atherton," said Horatio gravely.

Diana drew him away with "Just a minute" by way of apology to the others.

"You're sure it's penal servitude for him if he's caught?"

"As Atherton?"

"No. As himself. Brotherton. Buddy Drake, as he told you every one calls him."

"Yes, I'm sure. I liked the chap so much that I've made it my business to find out. I know a criminal advocate or two at my club, and Carthew—the judge, you know—is an old friend of my father. Of course in consulting them I didn't give anything or anybody away. But that's that. He can't get away from it."

"Thanks," she said. "Thanks for telling me."

His ear was conscious of a lack of tone in her voice, and he saw averted from him a miserable young face, eyes looking hopelessly into the distance, and young lips being bitten to control their quivering. He bent down, very kindly, and said in a half-whisper:

"I'm sorry, dear. I didn't know. But, all said and done, he's a damn good fellow. I'd stake my life on it. And any mortal thing that I can do—well, you've only got to ask me."

She flashed up at him. "You're a dear. Oh, God! what a pack of colossal fools we've been."

She broke away.

"Dolly, I'm famished. We must go and get food somehow. We'll leave Horatio to feed Muriel."

"There is sure to be dinner here for everybody," said Horatio.

"Then there'll be enough for Muriel. We'll go, and we can pick up Muriel after your talk."

Muriel said in a timid, indecisive way :

"Don't you think we might all dine together?"

"No, I don't," declared Lady Dolly. "Diana has quite enough of her own concerns to worry about. We'll get food at any old place, and when we've finished we'll drive back to Menton."

"But how shall I get back?" asked Muriel with great eyes of alarm.

"I'll see to that, my dear," said Horatio. "I have the Daimler with me. It is still great, and Fenwick continues to be its prophet."

Diana and Lady Dolly drove away and dined in a discreet corner of the Carlton; at least Lady Dolly dined, having little but the sorrows of others (which do not take away the appetite) to affect her digestion. Diana had no heart for food. Her heart, for perhaps the first time in her life, craved human sympathy. It found as much as it clamoured for in the kindly woman who gave generously. Well, you see, there was John in India, Charles somewhere in the Pacific, May (aged 15) at school in Leatherhead. There were bound to be convulsions, all sorts of devils to pay in the three young lives. She had a Faith, far transcending her belief in God, that in the convulsions and earthquakes and upheavals, the three fibres of herself issuant from her body, part and parcel of her spirit, would come to her—just come to her. She could never get further than that. They would, in the sacred nature of things, come to her for understanding, warmth, solace. Guidance? No. She put that, as an intellectual concept, away from her. Only fools needed guidance; and then they forgot and lost their

way. The intelligent, like her three children, would, in the nature of human beings with brains of their own, resent personally conducted tours through life. They would require and consume greedily, sympathies far too subtle for definition. They hadn't required anything yet. They were far too young and unaware. But a day would surely come. Meanwhile—and by no means the first—here was Diana, a subject to practise on.

In the car going back to Menton, Diana threw her arms around her.

“You're the dearest of all possible dears.”

Lady Dolly kissed her in the darkness, somewhere between eyebrow and cheek-bone.

“Just sense, my child. Have sense.”

When they entered the villa a sleepy manservant began mechanically to bolt the front door.

“Tell him to stop,” said Diana. “There's Muriel.”

“If she comes back, she can sleep in the garage,” said Lady Dolly.

Muriel didn't come back.

