

CHAPTER XIX

IF ever man was between the devil and the deep sea, that man was Buddy Drake. Such was the insistent thought of Diana in dreary trains, in dreary hotels of little towns, in dreary back parlours of antique shops, in drearier semi-furnished or craftily sham-furnished palazzi, during her annual collecting tour in Northern Italy. Hitherto she had thrown her heart into the business whose elements, none too simple, she had mastered ; for it demanded the fighting qualities of cynical caution, subtlety and dash, and it offered as reward the thrill of victory. She used to have the exultant feeling that dealers and noble owners of palaces who reluctantly sold their heirlooms were afraid of her. Her exultation was based on fact, for she went about like a dark flame.

That lovely, heavy walnut table with great winged lions each facing corner-wise on the legs—

“ A beautiful piece, Signorina. Genuine Venetian, early sixteenth century.”

“ My poor friend, how they have cheated you ! ” She would play with her fingers among the slant mouldings. “ Paris Exhibition of 1870-something. Possibly second prize. No, no. But that re-table over there ? ”

“ That—ah !—it is worth whatever an amateur will pay for it. I sold one not so good as this to a Brazilian two days ago for one hundred and fifty thousand lire.”

"It's good. It's all right. I'll give you five thousand. Unless you find another idiot from Brazil you'll have it cluttering up the wall, at a dead loss, for the next twenty years."

"And you, Signorina, if I let it go for five thousand lire, for how much will you sell it in London—unless to another idiot from Brazil?"

"I buy it solely as an advertisement for you, Signor Morelli."

And there would be laughter and head-shaking over a deal concluded satisfactorily to both sides.

But now this joy of bartering had gone. Her business became nothing but a sordid struggle with blatant thieves and specious rogues. She hated the whole lot of them. Her purchases were guided by a mere intellectual routine. At the back of her mind, at the back of her thoughts, at the back of her subconsciousness, as she slept, was Buddy Drake between the devil and the deep sea.

In either character, Atherton or Brotherton, his personal liberty was imperilled. As Atherton, for committing vaguely rumoured political offences; as Brotherton for impersonating the dead Atherton. Under which style was he passing in America? If as Atherton, what was his position?

On her return to London she sounded an old friend of hers, Sir Hugo Bellamy, M.P. He was an old member, encrusted like a barnacle on the House of Commons, and the wash of gossip of all the lobbies and all the committees in the vast building surmounted by the Clock Tower was music in his ears. He knew the inner secrets of all the Government Departments. He professed to scoff at Questions. He himself could have answered them off-hand. He called his political opponents by their Christian names and spoke of their policy with cynical tolerance. Many people wondered

why he had never held office and why thirty long years of Parliamentary service had been rewarded only by a knighthood ; but they were folks who naturally could not see men and things through the eyes of a Prime Minister. Anyhow, there Sir Hugo Bellamy remained, secure in an impregnable Tory seat, burly, resonant and super-knowledgeable.

"Atherton Drake ! Let's see, a neighbour of yours, or rather, your sister's, in the New Forest"—he knew everything—"a brilliant chap. No success in the House. Couldn't speak, as we understand speaking nowadays. Thin, subtle, pedantic, caustic. Overbrilliant. One of those men with brains too fierce for their minds. Oh, yes, my dear, he's come a mucker, an awful mucker, for that very reason. Thought he could outwit everybody and lost his sense of values. That's the most charitable way to put it. Of course he had to clear out."

"But why?" Diana insisted. She was his neighbour at dinner.

"Let us say that he incurred the displeasure of the Foreign Office. If he had remained in the country they would have had to take action, and there would have been the very devil of a scandal. So the F.O., who, after all, have nothing to gain by stirring up mud, let him make his get-away. They dropped him a hint. In such cases they often do."

"But supposing the Foreign Office or the police want to get him, after all?"

"Suppose they did. If he's in a foreign country how can they? Political offences are outside international extradition agreements."

"But he can't set foot on British soil ever again?" she asked.

"Of course not. Are you sorry?"

She drew a sharp breath at the casual question.

They were discussing Atherton. How could she regret his exile? But the pariahdom of Buddy was a different matter.

"I want to know the position. That's all. You see, one hasn't many first-class crooks among one's personal acquaintances."

Sir Hugo, a dark, heavily built man, laughed.

"You're right. Perhaps he was one of the most remarkable men who ever skimmed over your life. Here was a man born to intellectual glory who sold everything—intellect, honour, peace of mind—for money. Do you know, he was the next man to be elected to the Royal British Academy."

"What on earth is that?" asked Diana.

"It's the museum of the pure intellect of the country."

"What does it do?"

"It occupies rooms in Burlington House and admires itself."

"Thank goodness I've never heard of it!" said Diana.

That marked the end of the talk as far as Atherton Drake was concerned. She had learned more or less what she wanted to know.

Muriel gave her the name and address of Atherton's lawyers. She contrived an interview with Edgar Fry—pink, bald and benevolent. He received her with paternal courtesy, as Mrs. Flower's sister. The divorce suit. Ah, yes. A thousand pities it was ever brought. Thank Heaven it was stopped in time. And now Mrs. Flower had rejoined her husband and was perfectly happy? He was so glad. Now and again one caught a little ray of perfection in an imperfect world. How could he be of service to Miss Merrow?

"It's this," said Diana. "It's vitally important I should get into touch with Sir Atherton—nothing to

do with my sister, or the general fuss there seems to be about him—something quite private and apart. Can you give me, in confidence, his address?"

He smiled and raised a plump, smooth hand.

"I'm afraid not."

"Don't you know it yourself?"

"That's a question I mustn't answer, Miss Merrow."

"Would you forward him a letter from me?"

"No."

"That seems rather unreasonable, Mr. Fry." She paused for a moment. "If you like I could leave it open, so that you could read it."

Mr. Fry expressed regret that no letters of any kind could be forwarded to Sir Atherton. He rang for a clerk, crossed the room and joined the young man on the threshold and gave him a whispered order. The clerk presently appeared with a great tape-bound bundle of correspondence.

"You see, Miss Merrow, there's nothing personal in my refusal."

"I'm sure you don't know where he is," said Diana.

He regarded her like a genial sphinx, with just a fine network of anxious lines on his otherwise smooth brow.

"You may or may not be aware," said he, "that Sir Atherton's position—to say nothing of ours, his confidential advisers—is peculiarly delicate. You must therefore forgive my apparent discourtesy in sending you away without giving you any information."

He rose, signifying the end of the interview. She laughed as she shook hands.

"You've been perfectly charming, Mr. Fry. When I'm in difficulties I'll come straight to you. But you have given me one piece of information. You know less where he is than even I do. But I'm going to find him—and when I've found him I'll come and see

you again." She smiled radiantly in the passage, a pace away from the open door at which he stood. "And then I'll give you the surprise of your life."

This declaration was not dictated by any impulse of a triumphant moment. Diana was a young woman who had trained herself—perhaps in consequence of her unhappy affair with the Don Juanesque Guy Rickham—to control her impulses, treat them, however, with due respect, and take stock of them. And regarding Buddy she had taken stock of, about a million and had registered them carefully, and found that they represented concentrated forces whose resultant was an irresistible purpose. Of this she had given but the flash of a hint to Mr. Fry.

If the man to whom she was so magnetically attracted could not set foot on British soil she, remaining on it, could not possibly meet him again; which was as logical a proposition as ever confronted woman. His curious message came from New York. In New York, or somewhere else in America, could he be found. Of course America was a vast continent; on first thoughts it appeared that a human unit wandering about it would be as untraceable as a particular grain of sand in the desert. But second thoughts enabled her to realize that the United States have very stringent immigration laws, that every incoming alien is a marked man; that Brotherton Drake could not be so far lost that the police couldn't find him. She had also heard that the American police, chiefly of Irish extraction, when they were not up against extra-notorious evildoers, but, on the other hand, dealing with innocent folk who appealed to them for help—especially folk who were tactful and personally attractive—were a very kindly race. She had also heard of the sound admixture of a smile and a hundred-dollar bill.

Brotherton Drake therefore was as good as found.

Being a woman, however, she took into account the considerations which greatly mitigated the crudity of her resolution. For a long time she had vaguely contemplated the possibility of extending the business of Merro, Ltd., to New York. Only recently had her trading account justified, in any slight degree, an ambition so fantastic. She had never done such a three-months' trade. Pilkington, the invaluable, with a nose like a Périgord dog, could scent from London a truffle of an exquisite Renaissance piece buried somewhere in Westmorland. He should soon, she decided, be rewarded with a partnership. When she broached the question of a business trip to America to spy out the land, he responded with enthusiasm. Had they not already several wealthy American customers on their books, people of educated judgment who knew exactly what they were buying? Beyond doubt they would promise her their support. The firm would be as successful in New York as in London. And why? Because no fake had ever been allowed to enter those doors, still less to go out from them.

"We are building up a reputation," he cried with a flush on his sallow cheeks, "as one of the straightest expert firms in London. Soon the fact of a piece having passed through Merro's will be a hall-mark both of genuineness and authenticity."

"Mr. Pilkington," said Diana, delighted, "if you think I can reasonably draw a couple of thousand pounds out of the business to play with in America, I'll take you into partnership this very day."

"If it's a question of partnership, Miss Merrow," said Pilkington, the flush spreading to his temples, "I'd be only too glad to make up the two thousand pounds myself."

So that was settled. She trod on air. How had she

been so unpercipient hitherto as not to catch the imperative summons to New York in the interests of Merro, Ltd.? She proclaimed to her friends:

"I'm going to America on business. The shop flourishing? I should think it is. I'm going to see about opening a branch in New York."

No one, not even Muriel or Lady Dolly, suspected the irresistible purpose at the back of this gay and enthusiastic activity.

And Buddy, expatriated, and over closely shorn, had not the remotest idea how the wind was in process of being tempered to him through the obscure agency of a Mr. Pilkington.

Early in May she found herself on board the "Mauretania," proudest and most comfortable of ships. The liner carried out half the number of passengers that she would bring home. Diana felt that life, compounded as it was of pleasant human companionship, food eaten with the appetite of a primitive animal, golden air, faint soft breeze and quiet foam-laced indigo sea, was as gracious a condition of being as even angels would appreciate. Whence came the companions she scarcely troubled to inquire. With here and there a couple or a unit, male or female, she was linked by acquaintance with common friends. There were the conventionals. There were the casuals. The latter, chiefly male, were the more amusing. It never occurred to her—so occupied she was with purposes and responsibilities—as she lay in her deck-chair on the leeside of B deck pretending to read a novel, but all the time looking seawards out of her great dark eyes, the rich peach colour whipped into her olive cheeks by the Atlantic breeze, that to the young eyes—and even to the old eyes—of men, she was peculiarly beautiful and desirable. She did not trouble to think

of the hours of agonized deliberating that preceded the bashful approach of a modest youth. Some such she claimed of her own accord. She had a glorious sense of freedom which she knew how to temper with dignity. She ran a pretty riot of dancing and ball-playing and laughter.

On the third night out she auctioned the tickets for the run. She had a small triumph of joyous personality. An elderly American gentleman, a King of some commodity, came up to her afterwards as the smoking-room crowd thinned.

"You're a wonderful saleswoman," said he. "You could sell anything to anybody. Rosaries to a Methodist chapel, or Lido pyjamas to a nunnery. You ought to be in business."

"I am," laughed Diana. She dived into her bag and produced a crumpled photographic reproduction on glazed paper of a canopied Renaissance bed. "I'll sell you this straight away. It's in England, of course. It's genuine. It has a perfect pedigree. Queen Elizabeth didn't sleep in it, but Lord Essex did. Did you ever see anything so beautiful?" she asked, as he put on his horn-rimmed reading glasses to look at it. "Those bulbous posts, and the carving of the bedhead, and the moulding round the canopy, and the roof of the canopy is carved too. You can just see it in the photograph. Merro, Ltd., Sloane Street, London. That's me."

"How much are you asking for it?"

"Fifteen hundred guineas. For you I'd make it pounds."

He grinned. "Easier to work out into dollars."

"Of course you ought to have a house in which it can fit—or, at any rate, a room. I hate people to buy my things—I specialize in Renaissance, chiefly Italian, though this, of course, is English—and complain to me

afterwards that they don't look right with Empire stuff. Now, have you a room like that ? ”

“ Not quite,” he said. “ But I could easily build one. I've a country-house on Long Island Sound and I've been thinking for some time of adding on a new wing to it. This bed's great.”

“ You get your architect,” said Diana delightedly—they had drifted to a lounge seat by the wall—“ to make a ground plan of the site. Put that bed in the middle and create something really perfect all round it.”

“ My wife and I,” said the Some-Commodity King, with a twinkle in his eye, “ have slept both in New York and on Long Island Sound in good solid American beds which we bought at Wanamakers thirty years ago.”

“ You weren't contemplating changing from your old comfortable quarters with your old comfortable bed into the New Wing, were you ? ”

“ God forbid ! ” said the King.

“ Well, then,” asked Diana, “ what's the New Wing for ? ”

He beckoned a steward, turned to her.

“ My dear Miss Merrow, may I have the honour ? What shall it be ? ”

He was a very courteous, florid, elderly gentleman, with a highly trimmed mass of white hair parted in the middle. His looks and manners were those of an Ambassador. She knew his name—John P. Stebbings. One legend had it that once he was a barkeeper in Keokuk ; another that he was a bellboy in a Kansas City Hotel ; another that he had married, *en premières nocés*, the daughter of his employer who sold hamburgers and hot dogs down near the Stockyards in Chicago. Diana believed none of them. After all, what did it matter ? He had dark blue eyes with a

twinkle in them—many twinkles, suggesting the lightning changes of some calculating machine, that was measuring her, appraising her, summing her up, in the most courteously humorous way in the world.

“You ask what the New Wing is for?” He looked across the smoking-room as though his eyes followed the ministering steward. “Sure, not for Mrs. Stebbings or myself. We have all we want. Now there are two outlooks granted to old people—the retrospective and the prospective. For me, what’s gone is gone. Omar Khayyam said something about that, didn’t he? So I like to look into the future. I’ve got a son. I’d like to leave him, when I die, a family homestead of which he and his descendants may be proud. But the question is whether he should start fresh with whatever our own civilization is evolving as beautiful, or whether he should start with a faked past. I don’t mean to say your bed is a fake.”

“Of course not,” said Diana. “I see what you mean. You might fill the room with genuine bits, but you’d have to fake the walls and roof and windows—in fact, the atmosphere. You’re quite right. From your special point of view the first alternative is the honest one. I’m afraid I haven’t sold you the bed, Mr. Stebbings, for all my salesmanship.”

“Perhaps you haven’t.” He smiled with shrewd kindness. “But you’ve given me something much better—your understanding and sympathy.”

When she had left him, after shaking hands, she felt she had made a friend whose interest in her business welfare might be more valuable than the profit she reckoned to make out of the sale of the bed. As a matter of fact, the bed was still unsold by its owner, in an old country-house in Herefordshire. She had only an option. If she sold before the option expired,

she would be on velvet. If she didn't, she would be where she was. She went to bed and slept soundly.

Before they landed she had one or two talks with the wise and paternal Stebbings. He said once :

" You'll get on. You've got the English qualities that we try to laugh at and all the time secretly admire. You have force, but you don't waste it, and you know how to apply it. You can talk without using a megaphone and you're heard much more clearly. Wasn't it Fielding—I think it's the opening of ' Amelia '—who said that Life is as much of an Art as a statue or a noble poem? That's a conception the New World hasn't aimed at yet. If we did we'd have learned the law of restraint, which is one of the great canons of all Art. But we conceive life as a business. We blindly follow the eternal canon—but it takes the form of bluff. I've done it myself a hundred thousand times. But it's none the less vulgar and blatant. What I want to get at is this : when you of the Old World get there through restraint, under-statement, appeal to the imagination—of course a lightning stroke of an appeal—then we admire you and take you to our hearts. We don't tell you why. We're not giving ourselves away. But we're a fundamentally sentimental people, and deep down in our souls we have the unformulated conviction that life is really an art and not a business."

Here was a man who, practically unaided, had amassed an enormous fortune in the manufacture of cheap block tins and pans for kitchen use quoting Fielding and dealing happily with the formulæ of æsthetics ; a representative business American millionaire, who slept in an old-fashioned hideosity of a Wanamaker bed, seeing life steadily and seeing it whole, and going out of his way to commend her for qualities apparently absurd in his business world.

She was alive to the subtlety of the personal compliment; a tribute to the ridiculous old inherited inhibitions of gentle breeding—to the silly formula by which the lives of herself and her English world were governed; there were things one could do and things which one couldn't. She remembered discussing, with a distinguished foreign member of a polo team, the rough play of a member of the opposing team, and his replying:

"You either play polo like a gentleman or you don't play it like a gentleman. And there is no difference."

And he had been illuminatingly right. You could either play the game or practise the art of life like this or like that. There was no difference. But there was a spiritual distinction of infinite significance.

She thought of Buddy Drake and her real errand; the chase of this wild goose of a man whom she couldn't dissociate from an ache running through the fibres of her being and now and then, but for impatient act of will, threatening to become an idiotic torment. Suppose she found him, claimed him? What would he be like? What had been his past life? She knew nothing beyond what Horatio had told her of his confession. The foreign polo player's aphorism disturbed her. The memory of it had been evolved by old John P. Stebbings, the Tin Pan King. There was an inward invisible grace in old John P. Stebbings.

They steamed into New York Harbour on a day of May sunshine and pure clarity of air. The individual buildings of the weird jagged skyline stood out sharp white against the blue, their thousand tips gold and pink and violet as they were caught by the afternoon sun. Ferry boats and tugs drifted fairy-like, in one inextricable maze of dragonflies certain of their course, over the calm and happy waters. Away, along the

endless row of docks, the funnels and half-seen hulls of great ships proclaimed the mightiness of man and his triumphant conquest of Nature. The dock into which the nose of the "Mauretania" pointed was a mass, tier after tier, of bright, light colour, a strange pink preponderating, that of human faces.

As the ship drew near, the mass disintegrated itself into clean-cut human entities. There was flutter of handkerchiefs, waving of hats. Mr. Stebbings, by Diana's side, waved his hat vehemently. He clutched her arm.

"Mrs. Stebbings and my daughter. There—you see them?"

In spite of her excitement in approaching this strange and wonderful land, her heart was heavy. There was not a soul on those tiers of dock to wave hat or handkerchief to her, or blow her foolish kisses. She had, as a matter of business, written from Merro, Ltd., to her American customers announcing her visit. She had also cabled her school friend, Maisie Heywood, whose husband was on the staff of the British Embassy at Washington. But the chance of Maisie being on the pier to welcome her was remote. If only Buddy Drake had received her telepathic messages and was there awaiting her, how her heart, relieved of its heaviness, would have leaped riotously when she caught sight of him; but before all this conglomerate mass of human friendship and love which seemed to take her to its heart, but which she knew, forlornly, unit by unit, would pass her by as though she had no existence, her spirits sank.

A depressed and chastened Diana went on the gangway, and, following instructions, found the letter M where she must wait for her luggage in the vast, airy, dingy, comfortless sheds of the New York Custom House. M is a bad and crowded initial. The Macs

alone take up a lot of it. The dreadful recessed pen was thronged. No flat surface of any kind offered a seat. Placards all over the place prohibited the poor comfort of a cigarette. There was no air on that warm May afternoon in the infernal shed.

One or two articles of her luggage had already been dumped on the counter. She went to the edge of the pen to claim the rest and direct its placing, and there she met Mr. Stebbings with wife and daughter. He was through, having but a man's insignificant impedimenta, and also the courtesy of the port. Introductions were made. The daughter was as smart as the Rue de la Paix. The mother was the typical American mother: waxen-faced, plump, white-handed, wearing the queer, tall, soft, black felt hat, like a misshapen flower-pot, which for some inscrutable reason America has prescribed for all her respectable women-folk over the age of fifty.

In less than a quarter of an hour the Stebbings family had seen her through the Customs and into a taxi, and she drove away through the clattering streets with a grateful heart for pure kindness shown to a stranger within American gates and a promise given to spend the week-end at the Stebbings' home on Long Island Sound.

