

CHAPTER II

THE hall was carpeted, steam-heated ; plants in tubs, discreetly set in quiet corners, and shaded electric lamps gave an impression of home and comfort. The liveried lift-man had the air of a family retainer. While he was ascending in the tastefully appointed and leisurely lift, Buddy was smitten by the sense of long-lost, far-off, beautiful things that had once been part and parcel of his life ; and suddenly the sense became transformed into an aching and a hopeless hunger.

The lift-man said, as they were going up :

" I beg pardon, sir, but when I saw you I was struck all of a heap. If I'd not taken Sir Atherton up ten minutes ago in evening dress, I'd have thought you was him, sir."

Buddy smiled pleasantly.

" I'm his twin brother."

" It's marvellous, the resemblance, if you'll pardon my saying so." The lift stopped. He opened the door, crossed the carpeted corridor and pressed an electric button. " Here, sir."

He entered his cage and disappeared downwards. After a short while, the flat door opened and Buddy came face to face with his own image.

The image started back.

" Good God !"

" Yes, my dear fellow, it's me. Buddy. I'm back again."

"Come in," said Sir Atherton. And when the door had closed behind Buddy he faced him in the hall. "You're the very last human being I should have expected."

"You're not very pleased to see me," said Buddy. The other raised a hand.

"It's a shock, I admit. You must give me a minute or two to get over it." He walked a pace or two and threw open a door. "Come in and sit down," he said.

"At any rate," said Buddy with a laugh, "you can see I'm not an impostor."

"That's true," said Atherton.

"In fact," said Buddy, when they had entered the room, "it seems that we're more alike than ever. In the old days I was robust and heavy, and you were never very fit. Now, I suppose I've lost weight."

Atherton looked at his scarecrow double and remarked coldly, motioning him into a seat:

"And a lot of other things, apparently. What have you come for? Help? Money?"

Buddy took a cigarette from a silver box.

"Always sagacious, my dear Atherton."

"Suppose I don't give you help or money?"

Buddy shrugged his shoulders; then, after a second or two, meeting hard and suspicious eyes, he answered:

"I'll not blackmail you in any way, on the strength of our resemblance."

A flush rose on the other's sallow cheeks.

"I wasn't thinking of such a thing."

"I'm not so sure. Anyhow, you'd be more or less justified. I look pretty tough, don't I?"

He gazed around the mellow, luxuriously-furnished room—a library, book-lined, hung with good prints, heavily curtained, warm, intimate, wealthy. A fire of fantastic extravagance flamed in the grate. A

wide, modern writing-table lit by shaded lamps gleamed with the silver of accessories. A curved mahogany typewriter case gave it a serious and business-like air. In a corner stood a vase of great golden chrysanthemums. How many years was it since he had inhabited a room with flowers in it? He drank in all these things that had once been his, his lost heritage, with eyes and soul athirst. He glanced at his silent sphinx of a brother, cold, reserved, clean in the dinner-kit of his respectable civilization.

"You've always been the wise one and I've been the fool."

o "Possibly."

"And you never suffered fools gladly."

) Atherton waved a vague hand of acquiescence. Buddy rose and touched his shoulder.

"I've not come here to talk rot and false sentiment. But I don't see how you and I can meet, like this, without feeling something. Old times—the dear old man—this damn funny twin bond between us."

The other edged away from his touch.

"I think the less said of old times and bonds, the better. You went your way. I went mine. Let us come down to facts. What is your present position?"

Buddy laughed and showed his dilapidated shoes. His position? Soon it would be at a street corner, or outside the queue of a theatre pit, while he played the ukelele. He was rather good on the ukelele. Unfortunately he had pawned his instrument a month ago in New York.

"Have you ever pawned anything, Atherton?"

Atherton flashed him a queer glance and, instead of answering the ironical question, asked him if he would have a drink. The things were set out on a table by the wall—decanters and siphon and glass.

"Will you help yourself?"

Buddy crossed the room. "And you?"

"Not for me. I've had my allowance, a glass of port, at the Club. Doctor's orders."

Buddy came back with his drink.

"What's the matter? Same old heart?"

"Same old heart. Much worse, though."

"I'm sorry, old man," said Buddy sincerely.

"It's awful rough luck. You with all your success, and—and the world at your feet——"

Atherton's fingers drummed nervously on the arm of his chair.

"Yes, yes! But there's no need to talk about me. You want money? How much?"

"If you could lend me a hundred pounds——"

"I can do that," said Atherton.

He went over to his writing-table and, taking his cheque-book from a drawer, which he unlocked with a key attached to a chain-hung bunch, made out the cheque and tore it from the stub. The book he relocked in the drawer. The cheque he left on the table.

"That," he said, rising, "ought to keep you from present starvation and give you a fresh start. Make the most of it, for it's the last you'll ever get from me."

"If that's your line, you can keep your money," said Buddy, with a flash of anger.

"What line did you expect me to take with you?"

"I thought perhaps by-gones might be by-gones. God knows they were tragic enough." Buddy paused, and met his brother's eyes fixed on him in cold hatred. He went on: "I thought perhaps you might have—well, not forgotten, but forgiven. I know I treated you badly—damnably—but I couldn't help it. Neither could she. You didn't love her. How the devil could a cold fish like you love anybody?"

She didn't love you. When we bolted you suffered in your vanity. Yes, I know, it was a nasty jar. You looked an utter perfect damn fool. I know what you felt. It was awful, I admit. But, as I say, you suffered in your vanity. When she died I suffered in my soul. Suffering you can't conceive. At any rate, as far as that's concerned, we're quits."

Atherton passed his hand over his thinning brown hair in a manner so like Buddy's habitual gesture that the latter was startled.

"You'd better take the cheque and go. I've had about as much as I can stand."

He looked very white and pinched all of a sudden, and Buddy felt a surge of pity for the sick man. He made another appeal:

"I'm sorry I can't. Don't you see? If you'd just bury the hatchet—it would be all right. I'd take the money and be grateful. You and I are the only two left. I don't suppose you see any more of Mother's folks, than I did. I've done all sorts of rotten things in my life—but I've really played the game."

"Yes. Football, cricket, the Army. Mona 'too, eh?"

"Can't death make things sacred between us, old chap? Wipe them out, as it were?"

Atherton sank wearily into a chair and covered his face with his hands. Buddy mechanically finished his drink and lit a cigarette. He was possessed by an absurd longing to strike some chord of affection in this twin image of himself. He said in a low and appealing tone:

"What can I do, old man?"

The other took his hands from his eyes and hunched his shoulders.

"I don't know. It's all so sudden. Perhaps I've

misjudged you. I thought you were—never mind what I thought. . . . Anyhow, I've hated you all my life. You had things I could never hope to have. I may be wrong, I'll have to think it over."

He rose and went to the table and took up the cheque, and his lips curled in a faint smile.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't take it. Perhaps you'll get what you want with it and come and see me to-morrow afternoon. Will you?"

"Of course," said Buddy.

"My servants are out to-night. But I ought to warn you—Bronson is still with me. Do you remember Bronson?"

Buddy repeated the telephone conversation.

"He took my voice for yours," he said.

He turned to the side table and helped himself to another drink. Sketching a pledge with the glass, he became aware of an expression of disapproving inquiry on his brother's face. He answered it carelessly:

"I suppose so. I never heard of a down-and-out who was a confirmed teetotaller. And liquor in America is really a rich man's hobby. When one begins to drink beyond one's means. . . . Well. Here's luck."

"You'd better give it up," said Atherton, "if you can't exercise self-control."

Buddy laughed. "You haven't changed. You still talk like Ernest in 'The Swiss Family Robinson.' I wonder what you've got out of life."

"And what have you got?"

"As much fun as I could find money to pay for. My God, if I had your money and my experience!"

He laughed again, rather loudly; then suddenly checked himself. He realized the possibility of his being affected by the liquor he had drunk, without food, since his arrival at Waterloo. Also Atherton

had risen from his chair, and was confronting him, with suspicion and hate in his eyes.

"My money! So that's what you've come for, is it? You heard I was a crock and thought you'd be in at the death——"

"You're crazy, man," cried Buddy.

"A minute or so ago I was fool enough to weaken—to begin to wonder whether after all I was wrong. But I'm not. You're the same hypocritical, drunken wastrel you've always been. I was ass enough to think I might change my will—— Oh yes, I've made my will. And not a penny for you. Damn you. Coming here like a vulture——"

Buddy caught him by the shoulder.

"Stop, you fool," he shouted. "I wouldn't touch your money. Here's your beastly cheque."

He threw it on the ground, and made for the door. His hand was on the knob, when he heard a thud behind him and, swerving round, saw his brother a huddled heap on the floor, the cheque within an inch of the fingers of an outstretched hand.

After a few moments Buddy rose from his knees. Heart and pulse had stopped beating. Atherton was dead. He had learnt enough during the far-off four years of war to know when a man was dead or alive. Atherton was dead.

He drew the body into a seemly posture and fetched a cushion for the head. He stood, staring down.

What should he do? The servants were out. A doctor? He had not been in London for ten years and knew not the whereabouts of any doctor. He must go out to the landing and summon the lift-man.

He bent down again. There was no doubt. Atherton was dead. The lift-man was the only ready help.

Atherton's body lay on the edge of the hearth-rug, between the back of the writing-table and the fire.

Over the mantelpiece was a mirror. By chance Buddy caught sight of his own face, as pale and drawn as that of the man on the ground, and shudderingly identical with it. He himself might be lying there—dead.

The flash of a wild idea stunned him for a moment, like an electric current of high voltage. He stood gaping down at the dead man—his own image. The two were indistinguishable one from the other, alike in build, feature, voice—even in the thinning brown hair. Recovering from the shock of the idea, he wrestled with the fantastic temptation. Why, not? He had nothing to lose. All to gain. It would be the maddest adventure even in his absurd life of a thousand chances. Wealth and ease could be his in a few minutes, and to retain them only a matter of luck and mother wit.

He had done his best to make peace with Atherton. Atherton would have none of it; he had turned the twin-brotherly bond into a tie of hatred. There was no sacrilegious betrayal of affection, in that which he was tempted to do.

It was done with an agonized exhilaration of speed. At any moment the servants might return. And he was aware of the supreme legal importance of the exact hour of sudden death. It was a task where nerve-racking horror gripped him only when half-way through. It presented strange difficulties, almost impossibilities, that he had not foreseen. The room became alive with the threat of approaching witnesses. The falling of coals in the grate made him start in awful apprehension.

At last, after desperate physical exertion, the new Sir Atherton Drake wiped the sweat from his brow and looked down on his dead and disreputable self. He had been thorough. Even the cheque he had placed in the old letter-case now in the breast pocket

of the man on the floor. He took another shot of whisky to steady his nerves. There was no danger now of muddling his brain. Never had it been so clear.

Incongruously there came to him the livid memory of the night after Mona's funeral. It was the first night at a Repertory Theatre in New York of "Arms and the Man." He was playing Bluntschli. His future, as it seemed, depended on his performance. He had strung himself up with whisky until he felt like a god of infinite clarity of mind and masterfulness of will. The press had acclaimed his triumph.

If he couldn't act in the grand manner, what in the name of God could he do? He was thrilled by the sense that he was playing a part greater than man had played before.

He went out and, crossing the carpeted strip of landing, pressed the lift-button. Immediately afterwards the jangling vibration told him of the lift's ascent. The gates swung open. The lift-man, seeing him bareheaded, in evening dress, queried:

"Yes, Sir Atherton?"

Buddy beckoned him across the landing to the open door of the flat.

"My brother—you brought him up, I think, about an hour ago. Bronson and his wife are out. He's dead. A heart-attack, I think. I don't quite know what to do."

The lift-man followed Buddy into the library and saw lying on the floor the dead body of the remembered brother of Sir Atherton Drake.

"Have you rung up the doctor, Sir Atherton?"

"Not yet," said Buddy, sinking in a chair. "I sent for you first. It has been a great shock. I wish you'd do it for me, like a good fellow."

"Dr. Selous, isn't it, sir?"

"Of course," said Buddy.

Selous, Selous. He must remember the name. He marvelled at the quiet efficiency of London servants. He did not reflect that any lift-man would have been an incurious fool who remained in ignorance of the names and qualifications of constant visitors to his tenants.

The lift-man turned up the doctor's number in the telephone book and called for it through the instrument on the writing-table.

"Hello. . . . Dr. Selous? Is the doctor in?" He turned to Buddy. "Yes, Sir Atherton?"

"I'll come to the telephone," said Buddy.

He conversed with the doctor. Told his simple story. His voice was unquestioned. Dr. Selous would come round at once.

"I'm afraid I must go and attend to the lift," said the lift-man.

Buddy nodded and thanked him, and when he had left, his eyes scanned the open page of the telephone book. There was the reference: "Charles Selous, M.D., 219 Harley Street." A taxi would bring him to Park Lane in five or ten minutes. These must be employed in exploring the flat.

He found the arrangements much as he expected. There was a little sitting-room which in a married household would have been the library, and the present library a drawing-room. There was a large and pleasant dining-room. There was a large bedroom, obviously Atherton's, with adjacent bath-room. Across a passage were a couple of bedrooms furnished with perfunctory formality, and obviously seldom or never used, with a bath-room between. Beyond were the kitchen and servants' quarters. In the master's domain there was no sign of feminine intrusion. On regaining the library he became con-

scious that the note struck in the room was one of austere and unimaginative bodily comfort.

He looked around at the pictures. They were all fine mezzotints and steel engravings, portraits of men, Lord Peel, the Earl of Aberdeen—excellent of their kind, but uninspiring.

The door of a cabinet next the fireplace stood ajar. For the sake of occupying the long and anxious moments before the doctor's arrival, rather than from curiosity, he opened it. It contained an orderly mass of printed papers, and one little medicine-phial. This he examined: "The Drops. Three in a wine-glassful of water, when needed." Evidently kept there, ready to hand, in case of a heart attack. As he held it, his glance fell on a wineglass set beside the decanters and the siphon on the silver tray. He remembered wondering, earlier in the evening, what the silly glass was for, wondering vaguely whether the precise Atherton used it as a measure for the whisky which should go to a drink. Now he saw its purpose.

A sudden thought flashed through his brain. He himself, in the eyes of the doctor and his servants, would be a sufferer from some heart trouble, something ending in "-carditis"; he who was as tough and sound as any Marathon runner. He stood aghast at the idea. The part he had set himself to play was beginning to present unforeseen difficulties. Yet he must play it.

He had just poured a drop of the red liquid into the wineglass and squirted into it a dash of soda-water, when the door-bell rang.

He admitted a fresh-faced, kindly man who beamed at him through gold-rimmed spectacles.

"My dear fellow, this is a dreadful thing," he said, taking off his overcoat. "Tell me all about it."

"There's nothing much to tell," replied Buddy nervously, feeling as though he were speaking his opening lines before an uncertain audience. "It's my twin brother whom I hadn't seen or heard of for ten years. He came unexpectedly, dead-broke and ill and asked me for assistance. I did what I could, and then suddenly he fell down"—he snapped his fingers—"just like that. You can't do anything, of course. The poor fellow is dead; but I had to send for you."

"Naturally. Where is he?"

"In the library. I'm all alone. Bronson and his wife are out."

He opened the door for the doctor, who strode in and uncovered the face of the dead man.

"My God!" he cried, leaping back.

"Yes," said Buddy, "there was a strange resemblance between us."

"Resemblance? You were almost identical."

The doctor bent down and made his examination. Yes. The family trouble. His father, Sir Michael, had died of it.

"You had no knowledge of it, Drake?"

"None. He seemed strong enough when I saw him last. But, as I say, that was years ago."

They went over the ground, as men will, for a few minutes.

"There's really nothing to be done—from my point of view," said Dr. Selous, "except the sad, dreary formalities. I'll help you through them as far as I can."

"You were always the kindest of men," said Buddy.

The doctor laughed off the tribute.

"It's you that I'm concerned about. This must have been a horrible shock. How are you feeling?"

"I was upset, of course. But I came through it better than I should have thought possible."

The doctor's eye fell on the phial and the wine-glass with its pink residue of dose, and he waved a hand towards them.

"Quite right in the circumstances, but don't overdo it."

Buddy gave him the necessary assurance. He wasn't going to stimulate a perfectly sound heart. He had a nervous dread lest his genial friend and doctor should pull out a stethoscope there and then and insist on auscultation.

They talked for a while and then the door opened and a middle-aged man appeared, clad in the dark-grey tweed out-of-doors suit of the well-to-do serving man. He stood in the doorway.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Atherton. I thought——"

"Come in, Bronson," said Buddy, "I want you."