

CHAPTER XX

FOR the first month of Diana's stay in New York nothing very much happened. Between the cold American business brain and the warm American personal heart there is the most yawning of all abysses. Through the Stebbings and Maisie Heywood, who came from Washington to see her, and through a casual acquaintance here and there, she soon formed a pleasant circle of friends. Socially she was successful. In business she had to confess to failure. Her old clients were kind and wished her well; which was not very substantial. Her fellow-tradesmen in the antique to whom she had brought introductions, or introduced herself, received her civilly, but showed plainly that they wished her evil; which was substantial enough, but very depressing. She found among the latter an acceptance of trade customs which would find no place in her possibly uncommercial system of ethics. The ostensible reason therefore of her American trip began to melt away into nothingness. She began to wonder what she should say to Pilkington. So much, however, for Merro, Ltd.

For Diana Merrow, in search of the strange human being to whom, with or without reason, she had given her love, there was very little more to be said. Friends and furniture-dealers passed before her eyes like shadows, pleasant and unpleasant. Behind the shadows lay the reality of purpose. She explored

every kind of avenue possible to woman. She had but one success. She went round the shipping companies, with the same question accompanied by the same smile, arresting and captivating to polite young clerks. Had they on their sailing lists, westward bound, end of January, early February, anyone by the name of Drake? They referred to files. They showed her the typewritten lists of first-class passengers. There were nine or ten Drakes, none of which could be her Drake. It didn't occur to her that Buddy could travel otherwise than under his disastrously 'usurped name. The idiot formalities involved in her own passport convinced her that he must have sailed as Atherton. He might have dropped the title. Anyhow, there was not even an "A. Drake" on the first-class passenger lists.

Then one evening, a rare evening of New York summer rain that beat hard against the panes of her eighteenth-story window, the last picture of Buddy coming into the Sloane Street shop, hunted, dripping with rain, and going out again into the raining night, flashed across her brain with a new significance. She felt that she could kick herself for a fool. The lingering glamour of Sir Atherton Drake had blinded her to the fact that Buddy, fugitive from justice, would not travel in the blaze of first-class publicity. She started on her road again. First the Cunard Line, then the White Star.

Then she got hold of him. The "Homeric," Third Class; a Brotherton Drake arrived New York the fourth of February.

But had she got very much further? She knew from his post card that he was in New York. Well, she had advanced a step. He had discarded the Atherton and assumed the reincarnation of his dead self. It was obvious that he had used his old pass-

port. What busy official could record on his brain the bald announcement in *The Times*, months ago of the death of an obscure Brotherton Drake? Flight had been easy; facilitated, as her omniscient friend, Sir Hugo Bellamy, had suggested, by the discreetly blinded eye of the Foreign Office.

Here he was, at any rate, either in New York or somewhere in the United States, going about under his own name. After this knowledge she breathed more freely. He had cast off Atherton and his evil works. She was relieved, in her search, of the Atherton incubus. Plainer sailing lay before her.

But here she was, too: a stray young woman in New York, unknown, save to her few acquaintances, very much alone and, when she thought deeply of her quest, exasperatingly helpless. To a human being in her quandary there was only one thing that could be dictated by common sense. She consulted an eminent firm of attorneys, recommended by Mr. Stebbings, who in their turn recommended and drew up an agreement protecting her financial responsibilities with another organization.

The result was a visit one morning from Mr. Nicholas Pyne. He was a youngish, fat little man of dark complexion, inconspicuous attire and agreeable manners.

"Miss Mellow," he said, "as you see by my card, I represent the Runok Private Investigation Agency, and you were so kind as to make this appointment. In what way can I be of service to you?"

She motioned him to a chair in her small hotel sitting-room, offered him a cigarette from a box on a table, and took one herself. She noted his punctiliousness in springing forward with a rapidly dived for patent-lighter. He had a pleasant smile. He suggested rather the knowledgeable young man who

found your books in a public library than a private detective. Diana had never met a private detective in her life.

"Well," he said, "you must take me into your confidence, Miss Merrow. With us, of course, it's not only a question of professional secrecy, but practically the secrecy of the confessional. Otherwise firms like ours would be out of business in a week."

He took out a notebook and pencil. Diana felt rather foolish.

"I want to find a man."

"A man," said Mr. Pyne politely. "What kind of man?"

She laughed and outlined her quest. A third-class passenger, named Brotherton Drake, had landed early in February from the White Star liner "Homeric." He had left America last October, after a residence of nearly ten years, during which time she believed he had been an actor in touring companies all over the United States. An Englishman? Yes. Age? Appearance? She replied to the best of her abilities. Could she give him any references—dates, places—concerning Mr. Brotherton Drake's movements during his ten years' stay?

She couldn't. More than ever before did the past life of Buddy come before her as a bank of mist and mystery. All she knew was Horatio Flower's report of Buddy's apology for his life.

"It's a pity," said Nicholas Pyne. "Every dry fact we can get hold of is important."

"But I suppose," said Diana, "in your profession you couldn't deal with any old number of dry facts without some imagination."

"That's so," he replied politely. "Our fees largely depend on our constructive imagination. The more facts we have, the easier the deduction, and the

quicker the case is over. Which means less fees to the client."

"That's all I can tell you, then," said Diana.

"Not quite all," said Mr. Pyne. "I must get my facts right. This man, Brotherton Drake, landed in England, you say, down and out. He returns third-class to America. What kind of a life was he leading in England?"

"That," said Diana, seeing in what kind of bog she might presently be foundering, "is nothing to do with you. I don't mean to be rude, Mr. Pyne."

He answered with a smile:

"There can be no impoliteness between impersonalities."

She threw up a hand with a laugh. "But you must look on me as a personality. How else could you take any human interest in the case? Why do you suppose I want to find this man?"

"How can I have any notion? From your general attitude I shouldn't say you want to bring him to justice for any reason."

"Quite the contrary," she declared.

He closed his notebook, put it in his pocket and rose.

"Grant me so much of your confidence, Miss Merrow, as to say that it would give you pleasure, if not a certain amount of happiness, if we found Mr. Drake."

She met frankly a kindly glimmer in the little fat man's dark eyes.

"It would. I might be able to pull him out of an awful hole he has dug for himself. I want to find him for his own sake. To do him good, not harm. I ought to have made that clear to you before. You understand, don't you?"

"I quite understand, Miss Merrow," said Nicholas Pyne.

The days of June crept on, with the heat of New York; and with them Diana's small acquaintance discreetly crept out. The heat from the myriad sun-baked buildings began to hang lower and lower over the airless thoroughfares. Some friends of the Stebbings' invited her to their camp in the Adirondacks. She resisted the temptation of sweet, clean living among sweet, clean folk. She must stay in New York. Business, she gave them to understand, was business. But while they thought of her business in terms of antique furniture, she thought of it in terms of Buddy Drake.

She sat one late afternoon by the window in her sitting-room looking from a now familiar but once a dizzying height, over the panorama of New York in pale dull gold of stagnant air. The mighty buildings near and far, towering above even her modest eyrie, dreamed superb in the haze of heat. Here and there the metal on a cupola caught by the sun struck a note of golden radiance. Below, dim, shadowy, countless tiers of windows too deep down for sun, whether eastern at dawn or western at eve, ever to shine upon; or deeper down still, as on some remote super-terrestrial surface, the entire traffic of the great east to west street; now an unmoving mass of tiny distinguishable surfaces, the roofs of motor-cars looking like black-beetles; now as though suddenly inspired into life, a swiftly moving mass of the seemingly insect horde.

Diana, sitting by her window, perched midmost between the sky which kissed the tops of infinitely soaring palaces and the seething earth below, seething in a horribly regulated organization, felt herself the loneliest thing that ever hovered in space between supreme beauty of human inspiration glorified by God and the hideous mechanism of soulless existence,

for ever hunted, for ever pushed around by the dull unminding and altogether abominable forces which constituted human life.

She sat by her window, moist in the oven-baked air, depressed and angry, making herself hotter by tearing herself to shreds. Diana—the Huntress. That was what she was. Hunting this wretched man down. Why should she go on? Why shouldn't she take the next boat to England and forget all about everything? What the devil was it inside her that kept her there, that compelled her with a force like a lodestone of life to await this man's discovery? He loved her. That she knew deep down in the depths of her femininity. He had thrown out towards her every kind of tentacle—psychical, spiritual, conscious, sub-conscious—with which man's desire for a woman could be equipped. Of his want of her she had no doubt. It certainly was the essence of what she chose to call her present idiot phase of existence. But she herself? She, Diana? What about the sane, sensible, all-knowing, all unshockable, modern yet fastidiously chaste entity that, to her, represented Diana? She shrugged her shoulders. She didn't care.

On an angle of the roof of a stunted ten-story building somewhere down the side street, she could see a woman taking down clothes from a line and a man watering a wooden box of flowers. She watched them idly till they disappeared behind the corner of the next house. She felt tired and dispirited. She had nothing to do. Nobody seemed to have any use for her.

The telephone bell rang like a carillon in her ears: a direct and joyous summons from the outer world. She danced across the room to the instrument. The desk-clerk announced the presence downstairs of Mr. Nicholas Pyne.

“Oh, send him up,” cried Diana.

Vanity-case in hand, she tidied herself before the mirror. When the bell-boy introduced her visitor, she went forward with outstretched hand.

"I've been wondering for days whether you had any news. Have you?"

"I think so," he said, "but I'm not quite sure. Have you anything to do this evening?"

"Nothing," said Diana.

"Would you care to go to a movie?"

Her heart fluttered, as her mind leaped to a conclusion.

"To identify him?"

He nodded. "The picture's showing at a not very swell house. Not like the Capitol or Roxy's. Nearly as big, though. In fact, it's away over in Brooklyn." To the New York mind Brooklyn, across the bridge, is not less remote than Philadelphia. "I think," he said diffidently, "you'd feel more comfortable if you didn't go alone."

Diana laughed. "You mean you'd like to take me to the movies?"

"Mrs. Pyne and I would."

"Your wife!"

She suffered the momentary little shock, familiar to every one, on realizing that the impersonal professional man with whom she came in contact, doctor, lawyer, policeman, has a private life of his own. Then she became aware of kindness beneath the alert, dark eyes. She added as quickly as she could:

"That's very charming of her."

"Not a bit. She's one of the firm. An unofficial member. She inspires confidence without asking for any. When I say 'confessional' she asks no questions. It's the only way of carrying on. I think you'll like her, Miss Mellow," he said with a little mixture of wistfulness and assurance.

"I'm sure I shall. What's the picture?"

"The Daughters of Mammon."

Diana sighed. "Oh, Lord!" What was Buddy Drake doing in such an awful galley?

"Mrs. Pyne and myself thought you might do us the honour of having a hurried meal with us. The first principle of detective work is never to go hungry on a job if you can help it. There's a little Italian place down town—real New York, which English visitors—ladies like yourself—don't have much chance of seeing. If you would put yourself in our hands——?"

Diana at the moment would have put herself in the hands of anybody far less trustworthy than Mr. Nicholas Pyne. She gratefully accepted the invitation. Where and when should they meet?

"Mrs. Pyne is right here, waiting in the car," he said.

Diana went swiftly to the telephone. "Why didn't you tell me before? She must come up and have a cocktail. I've got my little cellar."

"She'll have as many cocktails as are good for her down town," he smiled. "So, if you don't mind"—he pulled out his watch—"I think we'd better be getting along."

They got along, soon were a unit in one of the moving, halting, tight masses that make up the traffic of New York. Mrs. Pyne was a smartly dressed, pink and white baby-faced young woman, with an incongruously strong and determined voice. She drove the car. Diana conjectured that she drove Nicholas just as efficiently. She felt protected, amused, exhilarated, on the threshold of something new, even though it were but to see the shadowy presentation of Buddy on the screen. Already she had asked the question:

"Is he mentioned by name?"

"If he was billed as Brotherton Drake, Miss Merrow," Pyne had replied, "I shouldn't have asked for your co-operation."

Diana had dined; dined excellently at the cosy little down-town speakeasy near whose threshold—so Diana was forced to imagine, for she saw his uniform, and his friendly nod to Nicholas Pyne—lingered a New York policeman, guarding it against possible indiscretion on the part of Federal Prohibition officers. Mrs. Pyne had told her in an hour more about New York than she had heard in a month. They had crossed the long, long bridge. It was still daylight; the gathering dusk of June summer-time. The car had stopped suddenly before a blinding glare of electric light. Mr. Pyne had taken her arm and led her across the pavement, and rushed back to park the car. She had waited in the crowded glittering hall of a Palace such as no djinn of "The Arabian Nights" had the supernatural capacity to imagine. There were brilliant kiosks around where brightly wrapped-up things could be bought. Hovering along the stream incoming from the long queue outside were uniformed officials, men and boys in pink and yellow uniforms. There were flaming posters of "The Daughters of Mammon" playing at being Mammonite for all they were worth; and great photographic enlargements of the stars. Mrs. Pyne had shaken hands with a young man in a dinner jacket who disappeared into the box-office and emerged with three tickets. Everything was moderately safe for Democracy in the queue; but the commanders of Privilege were a great deal safer. Thus, in America, combining as it does the social practices of France under Louis XIV and the theories of Soviet Russia, a delicious blend of all the harmonies, everybody is satisfied. Fat

little Nicholas Pyne had turned up perspiring, after having parked the car. Diana had wandered, under guidance, as in a daze.

She found herself in the middle of the front row of the slightly raised balcony of a vast sloping auditorium, which was rapidly filling with its new audience. The house was beautifully lit with subtly changing lights. She looked at the programme which a gaily uniformed girl attendant had slipped into her hand. It announced a variety entertainment before the film of "The Daughters of Mammon." She scanned the items with less interest than irritation. All that to be gone through before the picture! The irritation, however, she hid from her hosts between whom she was seated. They explained the ever-growing demands of American audiences. They required a longer evening's entertainment than that provided by an hour and a half of story on a screen.

The orchestra, now purple, now pink under the changing light, played the first item. The curtain rose on a terraced mass of dancers, who went through the Ziegfeld and Tiller convolutions. A pair of male dancers appeared, incredibly acrobatic. A piano was wheeled on to the stage for a woman singer. There was more troupe dancing, with lighting effects.

Diana, wearied with suspense, gave little heed to the stage. Her programme announced three or four more items. Her eye wandered round the dim crowded house. In the tier below her two girls were giggling and chewing gum. She caught a few words, "If she could let a bum guy like that put it over . . ." Men and women were very much the same on any continent. Women, she supposed, were always fools enough to be fooled by men whom they knew to be fools. The thought gave her no satisfaction.

When a ripple of laughter drew her attention to

the entertainment she became aware of a little man in a modified clown's costume trying to set up a small steel-legged table covered with a black cloth. As soon as he turned his back, the table collapsed flat. The same happened with a tall black cabinet on wheels which he pushed from the wings. In essence it was the clown's classical business, old as the hills yet ever appealing. It was done, too, with modern neatness. No sooner had he set the table on its feet and run to pick up the collapsed cabinet, than the table flopped flat. And vice versa. At last, midway between the fallen table and the tottering cabinet, the clown paused irresolute; then rushed back to the cabinet, holding it up with all his strength. Diana joined in the artless laughter, for he had impressed the audience with the idea that the two pieces of furniture were inspired by diabolical agencies.

Now, as he righted the cabinet, therefrom stepped a man vaguely Mephistophelean, in black tights, who snapped a finger at the fallen table, which immediately sprang up as if at attention, and then turning, he snapped again to secure the cabinet. That done, he plucked the conical cap from the clown's head, disclosing a mass of white hair. The cap flew up straight into the flies. The Mephistopheles drew from his person a large visiting card all phosphorescent, which he flicked towards the clown. It disappeared into thin air. But the clown put his hand to the back of his neck, as though struck, and drew from his collar a charred bit of cardboard which crumbled to dust in his fingers.

It was all done very quickly, before Diana had time to co-ordinate the strange little white-haired man with some vague picture of memory. She had seen him before somewhere. Not on the stage. She turned to Mrs. Pyne.

"Who are these?"

"Cyrus and Gaffarelli."

Gaffarelli . . . why, yes . . . and then, and then only, did she become aware of something familiar in the walk of the man in black. Her brain whirled in a wild surmise. Certainty came when he stood behind the table enveloped in light against a sudden background of blackness.

She gripped Nicholas Pyne's arm.

"My God!"

He had been watching her. "Am I right?"

"Yes. Quite right. That's Brotherton Drake."

She leaned back, feeling rather faint. The air was stifling. Mrs. Pyne asked:

"Do you want to stay out the turn?"

"No," said Diana. "I've seen enough. Let us get out."

In the lounge they sought the soda fountain. An iced drink revived her. She turned rather sharply on Nicholas Pyne.

"Was it necessary to stage this dramatic effect?"

"It was quick and conclusive, and saved a lot of unpleasant interviewing, to say nothing of the expense."

"But if you were sure?"

"I wasn't sure. I told you so. If you inquired of the management here, you'd find they had never heard of Brotherton Drake. He has taken the professional name of Cyrus Bendyke. We traced him through Professor Gaffarelli, who was once very well known in vaudeville as a conjurer."

Diana laughed without much mirth, and the Pynes saw no reason for laughter. Professor Gaffarelli—the learned Professor from Turin (was it Turin?) whom the false Atherton had engaged to be his private secretary. Without a shirt!

"Why doesn't he wear a shirt?" She remembered her question. It was all horribly funny.

"Bendyke—is that the name?"

Pyne scribbled on a leaf from his notebook.

"That's the name. And the address where he's staying at present. This theatre, care of the Management, would, of course, find him."

She folded up the paper and put it in her bag. The great foyer was practically empty save for a few idlers, mainly in couples, who were regarding photographs and candy and cigar-stands. Outside, beyond the great open doors, rushed the traffic of the busy Brooklyn street.

"There is one thing I ought to tell you, Miss Merrow," said Nicholas Pyne, drawing her away from his wife, "something that may be serious." His fat, dark face assumed an expression of responsibility, like that of a physician or lawyer about to give bad news. "The New York police aren't such fools as they're made out to be in detective stories, or on the first page of newspapers. They know a lot. They know a lot about Mr. Brotherton Drake. What it is they won't tell me. If they would, I'd tell you. But it's something. I'm asking no questions. In case you know anything yourself, it's my duty to warn you."

Diana stood rigid. The impossible, irresponsible man was then in danger, here in New York. She said:

"In that case I must see him to-night. At once. He's in this building. How can I manage it?"

"His turn is nearly over by now. Give him a few minutes to change and we can meet him by the stage-door entrance."

"We?"

"Mrs. Pyne and I. Do you suppose we'd leave you all alone in Brooklyn?"

He smiled. She responded.

"You're rather a couple of dears," she said.

So they went out of the achingly brilliant light into the comparative gloom of the street, and eventually up a dim, close alley-way towards the end of which was the stage-door. And there they waited. All kinds of people trickled out. At last two figures emerged, one tall, one short. One had a bunch of white hair beneath a jaunty soft felt hat. The other was unmistakably Buddy Drake.

Diana rushed forward from the side of the wall and confronted him in the wedge of light from the open door.

He fell back, stared at her ; cried foolishly, "Diana !" and then swept her up in his arms.

