

## CHAPTER XXI

THE Pynes faded down the alley-way. Tonio withdrew into the dimness beyond the shaft of light. When mutual release happened, the two actors in the impulsive scene regarded each other rather foolishly, though their eyes still shone.

"It's you, of course. But it's amazing," he cried. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you—what else? Or rather," she corrected herself, "I came to New York on business and thought I might as well look for you."

"You've found me right enough. Though how, God knows. It's more than wonderful."

"I have some friends who helped me." She looked around. "They've gone." She made towards Tonio, holding out her hand. "This is Professor Gaffarelli, I think. Your private secretary."

"Now my partner."

Tonio uncovered his white head and bowed over the lady's hand.

"I suppose you were in front," said Buddy. "Yes? Well, you've seen how a man, in Life, can play many parts——" He broke off and seized her hands. "My God! This is more than wonderful."

Tonio approached, again raising his hat.

"Forgive me if I leave you, Miss Mellow. I go home. No doubt you would like to have some conversation with"—he paused, smiling—"Mr. Bendykc."

He bowed, and walked off at a smart pace. Diana

and Buddy followed him more slowly. He took her arm and walked close to her.

"Why have you been trying to find me?"

"I think I've made it pretty obvious to everybody. Except you, perhaps."

"My dear, I'm dazed. I've loved you and dreamed of you and wanted you ever since the first day I met you. But you? How could I tell? How can you reconcile me with the man I was?"

"Because you weren't," she said.

He checked her abruptly at the street end of the alleyway, struck by a note in her voice.

"What do you mean?"

"You weren't, you aren't Atherton Drake. You're Brotherton Drake, generally known as Buddy Drake. Atherton's dead. You took his place. I know all about it."

Buddy stood silent for a moment, unable to decide whether things were growing simplified or more complicated.

"I've only told two people in the world," he said in a low voice. "Horatio Flower and Tonio Gaffarelli. Tonio couldn't have told you."

"It was Horatio. He had to. I guessed. Muriel guessed. Bronson almost guessed. Any fool knowing you would have guessed. Not that you were Brotherton—but at any rate that you weren't Atherton. You gave yourself away all over the place. What time is it?"

He looked at his watch. "Half-past nine."

"We'd better get back to New York and get things straightened out," she said decisively.

She hailed a yellow taxi-cab.

"I'm afraid, my dear," said he, "I haven't a suite of rooms at a Plaza-Athénée to receive you in—not even a public lounge."

She cut him short, gave the address of her hotel to the driver, and entered the cab.

"I've a sitting-room at the Rochester," she said when he joined her and the taxi started.

They passed over the bridge and through the city of myriad lights, unreal, fantastic, culminating in the phantasmagoria of Broadway. At this hour of the summer evening traffic was thin. They spoke little; they held hands, both wondering in their respective ways at the new and strange happiness that linked them together. Their momentary lives were bounded by the side and front of the taxi-cab, caring nothing for the outside world. When it drew up at the door of the hotel, they gasped, laughing, unable to account for the swiftness of their journey.

Buddy leaped out, paid the driver and followed Diana into the hotel.

That was the first of their many meetings, their many talks, their many confidences, their many seekings for escape from a great dilemma, their many searchings of heart and conscience.

Buddy, as far as he could be aware, threw open all the doors of his past life. In some unlocked recesses were shames, in others aspirations; here were herded follies innumerable; there lurked repentances; in one lurked despair, in another, laughter.

He explained Tonio. What else could he have done than turn him into a British Grenadier?

It was to Tonio now that he owed his means of livelihood. He had landed in New York almost as penniless as he had landed in England. A certain sum he had taken from Atherton's funds to keep Tonio and himself from starvation. They had lived cheaply, more or less as he had lived in the old days, while they had invented and perfected their conjuring act.

At first they had earned very little. Eventually Tonio had found a former friend and manager in authority at the Brooklyn Cinema Theatre. This had been their first week of big money. They had made a hit. An agent was booking them a tour.

Why the professional name, Cyrus Bendyke? He had proclaimed himself as such to the mysterious Chrysolos whom he had so exultantly fooled. Should the Greek, unsatisfied with his barren vengeance, trace Atherton across the seas, he must again come upon Cyrus Bendyke, the American actor who he knew was not Atherton Drake.

His flight from England? He had been driven by Fear. Cold, awful Fear. For the first time in his life he knew what it meant to be shadowed. He had the first suspicion of the fact in Liverpool, when Tonio and himself had come out of the American Consulate where they had procured visas on their old passports. This procedure had been long, as there happened to be a great crowd of emigrants; but simple, because, for one thing, Tonio was an American citizen, and, for the other, Brotherton Drake's passport was dated long before the quota laws, and he had lived so long in the country that he was privileged to return indefinitely. In London, outside their obscure Bloomsbury hotel, he had seen the same watcher as in Liverpool. Then there was another man. And wherever he went one of the two was unobtrusively present.

That night in January, when he had dismissed his cab in Knightsbridge and walked down Sloane Street in the rain, he thought he had shaken off the detective. But at Waterloo there was one of them patiently watching. At Southampton Docks, near the gangway of the "Homeric," there was the man again, making sure that he had gone aboard.

The voyage had been a nightmare, the landing in

New York a sickening terror. Then, finding himself free and unquestioned, it dawned on him gradually that the Foreign Office and Scotland Yard might possibly have been glad to get rid of Sir Atherton Drake.

Diana told him of her talk with Sir Hugo Bellamy.

"He was right," said Buddy. "Only they gave me no direct hint. Their following me around without arresting me was hint enough."

To Diana much of his story, or rather the story of Atherton and Buddy's impersonation of Atherton, was an extravaganza indubitably true. The cipher, the untraceable account in the Lothbury Bank, Chrysolos, all belonged to the realm of the fantastic.

"The cheque-book, anyhow," said Diana, "was definite. Every cheque and counterfoil is numbered and can easily be traced. There must be ways of discovering the customer to whom the cheque-book was issued."

"I never thought of that," said Buddy. "I pitched it into the fire with the rest of the stuff."

"You seem to have been pitching things into the fire most of your life," cried Diana.

She questioned him as to his affairs, or rather those of the presumably living Atherton in London. Buddy shrugged his shoulders. As far as he knew they were doing quite well. Dividends from the various investments were pouring automatically into the Hanover Square bank, swelling the current balance whereby the bank was greatly profiting. That balance also must have been swollen by the proceeds of the sale of Newstead Park. The last thing he had heard of the place was that some people called Simpkins or Perkins had bought it.

"Wilkins," Diana corrected. "South African people." Muriel had called on them. They were

bright and merry and would liven the neighbourhood. Father, mother, son and daughter, all born apparently in the saddle, were heartily welcomed by Horatio.

The Park Lane flat was shut up. The keys were with Edgar Fry, the solicitor, who paid the rent on a lease several years still to run. Buddy had given him power of attorney at their last interview, before his bolt to Southport. Atherton's estate was just there; to say lying fallow would be wrong, because it was increasing by dividends month by month. What the super-tax people were doing he didn't know and didn't care. At any rate, being out of the country, he made no returns; he doubted whether the lawyers could. That, however, was their funeral. At which announcement Buddy grinned cheerfully.

Before leaving England he had sent Edgar Fry the two thousand pounds due to him under Atherton's will. He prided himself on the ingenious anonymity of the payment. With a view to it, for the matter had lain all the time on his conscience, he had been drawing from the bank notes of fairly large denominations, together with smaller ones, ostensibly for ordinary cash expenses. When he had collected enough, he had gone to the Bank of England and exchanged them for a couple of £1000 notes which he had put into a registered envelope and posted from the City to Edgar Fry.

"Simple, wasn't it?"

Diana, in answer to the question, shook her head.

"What a child you are!"

"Well, I'd like to know," he said, "how you would have managed it without giving yourself away."

"Not having put myself into such a horrible mess," said Diana, "I can't exactly tell. How do you know," she asked, "whether he ever got it?"

"Got it? By registered post?" Buddy, with an

exiled Briton's belief in British institutions, regarded her as though he could have mistrusted the hand of an Angel—professional Messenger—of Heaven. "Of course he got it. He couldn't acknowledge it, because he didn't know where it came from. And, even if he did, he couldn't, because he didn't know my address. Doesn't to this day."

"I was sure of it," said Diana, with a smile of satisfaction. "I told him so to his face."

Their talks were spread over many occasions. Usually they took place in Diana's sitting-room. For the first few days Buddy's time was limited. At the Brooklyn theatre they gave two full shows a day. Getting backwards and forwards by subway from his shabby, cheap, down-town hotel took up considerable time. And then there were the morning practices on which Tonio, guide of their joint fortunes, insisted, so that fingers should be kept supple and eye unerring. This rehearsing continued during the next week, after the engagement had ended and he was free. They had a fortnight out, their tour, somewhat sporadic as yet, not beginning till a date in July.

On the first Sunday of freedom they went up the Hudson, by car, beyond Dobb's Ferry, and found a little restaurant with a garden, somewhat crowded, it is true, by New Yorkers whom the baking city had sent out panting for cooling airs, but still fresh and leafy. They brought Tonio with them. Diana, predisposed to admire the kindness, wisdom and loyalty of the little man, fell in love with him. For one thing he was a white-haired grown-up romance. He had run the gamut of social vicissitude. Once, successful artist, he had saved Buddy from death, and, life assured, from subsequent starvation. Then—she looked at his gnarled, maimed hands—he had sunk to the degrading depths of poverty. Buddy had

miraculously found him—without a shirt!—and for a few months had set him in the midst of all the comfort of luxurious living. And now, after a spell of evil weather, here he was back again in the old profession, partner in, and so much part and parcel of, their combination, “Cyrus & Gaffarelli,” that no one, not even themselves, could tell where one began and the other ended, and on the road again to queer success. He was so modest, yet so enthusiastic.

It is a poor human being who is insensible to the fascination of magic, even though it be that of an avowedly fraudulent magician. How can a man produce a bowl of goldfish from nowhere? How can innumerable eggs proceed from his gradually widening lips. How could a table, as Diana asked, act like a malignant, sentient thing?

Tonio, delighted, gave away the magician's secrets: cunning electric control, invisible wiring and switches; perfect timing. Buddy and he had worked it out together; all Buddy's imagination and handy man's knowledge of mechanical things. He himself had been only a conjurer, an expert in prestidigitation—in which art Buddy had been, and still was, his pupil. The consummation of the partnership was the present act which, having in it something of novelty, seemed to please the public. Meanwhile they were planning and rehearsing other effects.

The afternoon passed pleasantly. Diana found herself admiring Buddy's attitude towards the little man; his self-effacement so that the other should shine. She knew that if she referred to it he would say with a laugh: “It's Tonio's day out.”

During the next week they saw each other every day. They surrendered themselves to the idyllic, seeking each other and rejoicing secretly at discovery.



It was she, the woman, who discovered the more, in spite of Buddy's conviction that he had stripped his soul bare of any shred of disguise.

"If you want to see an absolutely naked fool," he said, "here you have one."

She lay back, her eyes melting. "Yet, somehow, a very dear and precious fool. I wouldn't change you for another wrapped up to the neck in wisdom."

Which was all very pretty but led to no practical line of contact. For each, being endowed with ordinary sanity, knew that before them loomed a future which, as far as lay in human power, must be jointly determined. Now and then she would tentatively refer to it, but he brushed her allusions aside.

"Let us live just for a little in the present. Let me feel the grace of your—of you, yourself, about me. I've had such a rotten time. Oh, I don't want pity. I've contrived every bit of it for myself. The wonder is how I generally manage to get through. God, I suppose, takes a hand. He must. How else could I have got you?"

Buddy was good to look upon: slim, brown-haired, finely featured, with blue eyes that could dance with merriment and quickly make an appeal of great wistfulness. He was well-knit, clean in body and mind, sincere in his adoration; a personality eager for sympathy both to receive and to give. And Diana vibrated with the stirrings of youth, which may or may not be—it all is a matter of the infallibility of opposing systems of philosophy—the promptings of eternal wisdom. So she took, in her young hunger, all that he gave; gave all that he, devoteddest of lovers, craved from the idyllic moment. All a young woman's moral structure from her brain to the pulses in her feet can be as hard as nails when she is selling a chair; but that is no reason for denying that every-

thing within her may be as soft as butter, when disposing of her heart.

So Diana yielded, and spoke no more of the future, which, however, when she was alone in her eyrie, looking from her window at the bewildering towers of the vast and alien city, loomed, black and threatening, blotting out the far blue of the late June sky.

It was not so much a question of what would be the end, as of what was to be the beginning. When they emerged from this evanescent land of the fantastic, from what point of real existence could they start? The glamour of worshipping eyes and of dear words, the thrill of clasping arms and of kisses—all that was joy undeniable; but it was momentary. It could not remain for all time unless it was—what? Her mind sought a word, a figure, an analogy. She stumbled lamely on the painter's term—fixed. There must be something to save the bloom from being brushed or blown away. What could there be in definite action, calm, deliberate action, to fix the ephemeral loveliness of their idyll?

She began to worry herself into sleepless nights, the effect of which she strove to hide from Buddy at their next meeting. And so there came a day when she noticed lines around Buddy's eyes and at the corners of his lips, and signs all but imperceptible that, with him, too, the dream was beginning to fade into a despair.

They had arranged a jaunt—this time to Coney Island, which she had never seen; Tonio to be their companion. Lest Buddy's pride should suffer, she had hired for a month the car that had taken them up the Hudson, giving him to understand that it had been her customary apanage in New York, essential to her business. He had no reason for doabi? A woman's car is her car. Social convention makes it as

unthinkable for a man who is her passenger-guest to offer to pay for her petrol as to pay for her stockings.

Diana, at the appointed hour of meeting, went down to the comfortable discreet lounge of her hotel. A moment afterwards Buddy and Tonio entered.

"What lovely punctual people!"

They smiled at her gay greeting, but she was quick to detect anxious faces.

"What's the matter? Tell me."

Buddy told her. The agent, Bernheimer, had let them down badly over the tour. Instead of being continuous their engagements—only pencilled as yet, with no signed contracts—were for odd weeks here and there, spreading through several months. Bernheimer had sprung the news on them by telephone that morning.

"We thought it was all fixed up," said Tonio. "Were to go and sign the contracts on Friday."

Buddy shrugged dejected shoulders. "It's all in the day's work."

"My poor dears," said Diana, looking from one to the other. "What are you going to do about it?" She hesitated for a second or two. "Do you feel like Coney Island?" They didn't. "Neither do I," said Diana.

"I must go and see the brute, my dear," said Buddy. "A greasy, oily, slippery beast. He has filled up our weeks with more expensive turns. Bigger commission for him, don't you see?"

"It seems a short-sighted policy," said Diana.

"Thieves like Bernheimer believe in it. They get the dollars when they can. As quick as possible."

They discussed for a while the unpleasing proposition. Diana was indignant. Then Buddy announced that, subject to her graciousness in cancelling the Coney

Island excursion, he had made an appointment with the unspeakable Bernheimer.

"Take the car and come back and tell me all about it," said Diana.

"That's sweet of you," said Buddy. "But Tonio. He wants to come with me. I don't want him. He's about as fit to deal with Bernheimer as with a slimy arch-devil in hell."

"I'll keep Tonio till you come back," said Diana.

On such a little decision was to hang the fate of all three.

For the first time Diana and Tonio found themselves alone together. They had mounted, after Buddy's departure, to her little apartment.

"This," she said, "must be an awful blow to Buddy."

He did not reply for some time. Then he said earnestly:

"Miss Merrow, perhaps it is a good thing for Buddy, a blessing in disguise."

His tone startled her. "How?" she asked.

"Do you think Buddy is a happy man? How can he be when he loves you and you love him?"

She looked deep into his kind, dark eyes.

"Tell me exactly what is in your mind, Tonio. I think I know. If it's the same that has been at the back of mine, I'll understand. You're a true friend to Buddy."

"Friend?" cried Tonio, with a smile. "He is more than that. He is the only human being I have to love in the whole world. I would die for him."

"You can love me a bit too, then, for his sake," said Diana, "so you'll have another."

There was a moment's interlude; for the moistening of eyes, a laugh, the lighting of cigarettes.

"Tell me," she said.

"We know Buddy, you and I. He is capable of all

follies—but no really bad follies. An impulse, an adventure occurs to him, and so long as it hurts nobody—well, he can't resist. It's his nature. But also he is sensitive, generous, loyal. He lives clean; always has. Once he drank too much whisky—years ago. But now he drinks for his health or his pleasure, just like you and me. Since the day he picked me off the Boulevards in Paris with my monkeys, never, never has he exceeded. It is right I should tell you this. He is a dear, good, good man, and"—he paused, and bent down in front of her, touching her shoulder and looking into her eyes as he spoke—"he is going through hell."

She said, her face set:

"Yes. I'm beginning to realize it. And it's up to us to follow him."

"That," said Tonio, turning away and waving a crippled hand, "is beyond me. That is for you. I can only tell you about Buddy. He is a man without a name, without a country. I know everything. If he went back to England as Atherton Drake, he would be arrested for—for what?—treason. In his own real character, Brotherton Drake, he is a criminal. If all were known, your police could come right here and arrest him."

"I know," said Diana tonelessly. "As it is, the New York police know something against him. What it is I don't know. Our Foreign Office may think he's Atherton masquerading as the dead Brotherton, and have warned New York. It's an insoluble mix-up."

"My dear lady," said Tonio, "that's not the question. We are dealing with Buddy himself as a human being who suffers. Look. Let me talk. If he was a man of no account, like me, without any ties, just a bit of mud thrown up by the sea, it wouldn't matter. But he isn't. He has you. He is a hunted—

—a criminal, without any home, without a sure way of making a living. You see for yourself. What is he doing now with this dreadful man, Bernheimer? What can he hope for? For himself, as I've said, what does it matter? He has starved in his time, and God has pulled him through. So it may be again. But you? He and you are one now. What are you going to do?"

She rose and drew herself up and, even in his emotional state, he saw that her face had gone suddenly white.

"You think there is only one thing for him to do—for his real happiness. For mine—for our future?"

He knew that she understood, and moved away with a vague gesture of assent and a whisper.

"Yes."

She swayed for a moment or two. Then, white and shaken, she crossed the room and clasped Tonio's head between her hands.

"He's a real man, Tonio, isn't he?" she cried rather wildly.

"A real man," said Tonio.

"Then he shall do it. We'll do it together, he and I. The next boat home. And you too, Tonio. You're part of us."

Buddy came back dejected. She asked:

"Well?"

"You know your 'Merchant of Venice'—'You may as well use question with the wolf,' etc. It's about the end of things."

He threw himself into a chair. Diana knelt beside him.

"I've been talking with Tonio. It's not the end, but a beginning. There's only one thing in the world for you to do."

He looked at her haggardly. "I know what you're going to say. Go back and face the music—the whole awful jazz band."

She sat back on her heels. "How did you guess?"

"I know what any decent man or woman must think of me. But suppose I do. How's that going to help things—except from the point of view of my own private conscience? What about you?"

She sat still further back on her heels, her whole youth taut before him.

"Me." I don't count for much. But, anyway, I'll face any kind of old music with you, from now to the end of your life."

Tonio went to the open window and, resting his elbows on the protecting bar, looked out at the magic city. Presently he felt his shoulder in a strong grip. He turned and saw a new Buddy.

"We're going to Coney Island, after all. We're going to have a hell of a time."

