

CHAPTER XXII

NOT long afterwards they sailed from New York, booking their passages under the names of Sir Brotherton and Lady Drake. They must sail under true colours from the start, said Diana.

It was she who had insisted on their marriage. She had put forward arguments so cogent that Buddy was compelled to yield. At first he had resisted stubbornly, stirred by every instinct of conventional honour. He knew and she knew to what shame and disgrace he, of his own free will, was heading.

"If you think I'm too feeble to stand it," said Diana, "you'd better tell me now, and we'll have done with it once and for all."

This was unanswerable. To him she gleamed a faultless radiance sheltering him from the dark wrath of God.

He fell back on his second line of defence. There would be imprisonment. Separation for God knows how many years. That alone made marriage impossible.

"Why? You think it honourable to give me the chance of changing my mind. Some other man might come along and I'd be quite justified in looking on all this as a nightmare. Or else, when it was over and you were free again, I might shrink from you in horror. Let us be blatantly frank. There's no other way. That's what worrying you, isn't it?"

Of course it was. If she still loved him the prison gates would open into heaven.

She countered. That was his point of view, which she appreciated—the point of view of the perfectly honest but stupidly selfish man. What about her point of view? Her feelings? Had he ever summoned up the sense or taken the trouble to appreciate them? She loved him. She supposed he had got that fact nailed into his head. And he loved her?

“Oh, my God!” groaned Buddy.

Well, there was the position. She had pledged herself to face things with him, share things with him, physically as far as material things allowed, spiritually with all that was in her, till the end of time. Did he understand that?

“As far as man can understand miracles,” said Buddy.

“There’s no miracle about it. We’re just two human beings who know their life’s happiness is bound up in each other. What do you suppose would be for my greater happiness? To wait for you, as a girl, eating my heart out for you, with no real bond between us, or as your wife, with all its pride of responsibility? And supposing there was a child. Wouldn’t that be a joy and a help to us both?”

Buddy sat with his hands over his eyes and muttered something about the poor little devil’s father being in gaol. She swung his hands away with hers. What did it matter? It would be something for the boy to be proud of when he was able to understand. She would see to that.

This was the end of the argument of their last discussion. She stood before him superb and glowing.

“What else have you got to say?”

He was dumb. What could man say? She laughed, as his arms closed around her.

And so they were married and Tonio was best man. She posted announcements to her friends in America a few hours before the boat sailed.

Tonio, as she had decided, accompanied them. Merro, Ltd., was understaffed. Pilkington must find a corner in which Tonio, keen and intelligent, could be of great service. He might be invaluable. Give him a soap-box, said Diana, and, before a customer's eyes, he could turn it, with a flicker of his hands, into a quattrocento *cassone*. Tonio could also help her to face the music.

Her last few days in New York had whirled by in sudden activities. A friend of John P. Stebbings had bought the famous bed, subject to his nominated London expert's report. One of her American customers, dashing through New York on his way from Mexico to Canada, had summoned her by telephone to an interview in which he had given her orders to find various expensive odds and ends of Renaissance furniture—Spanish if possible—for a house he was building in Santa Barbara. He scouted the idea of her losing heart in the project of a New York branch. Get him what he wanted—he had the most clear and accurate knowledge of it—and he would guarantee a successful start. At the same time, dealers who had hitherto held her in some suspicion approached her with business propositions. Thus the financial prospects of Merro, Ltd., were greatly brightened. The firm could well afford to look after Tonio, whose future had been, at first, Buddy's chief concern.

The "Aquitania" was full, it being the ⁴season of the great American pilgrimage to Europe. The three sat together at an obscure corner table in the immense saloon; but except at meals Tonio was seldom with them. He had a wraith-like way of disappearing

into remote recesses of the ship, and an uncanny faculty of being within call whenever his presence was required. Buddy and Diana kept apart from the social life of the gay community. They allowed, through here and there a channel—doctor, purser, stewards—the whisper to circulate that they were a honeymoon couple desirous of being undisturbed. The Americans had never heard of Sir Anything Drake. They admired the bride, who was fair to look upon. The English, some of whom had heard of Atherton, wondered who the devil he was. They were lucky in finding no personal acquaintance on board.

So they lived a strangely quiet, isolated and unmolested life. And for the two of them it was a life of intense happiness dignified by the tragedy which, hour by hour, they were inevitably nearing. They loved most to sit on the boat-deck, in a space between two boats, on the windward side which, as the weather was rough and squally, was shunned as comfortless by other passengers. There they could stay almost thrillingly alone between the grey sky and the grey-green sea, and either hold hands in silent communion, or talk of things past, present and to come, each in intimate search of understanding in the soul of the other.

They had their light moments. Both were endowed with the High God's supreme gift to man—the gift of laughter. Each could give the Tragic Mask a twist, rendering it grotesque, incongruous with itself, an object provocative of mirth.

“Let us think of it in terms of the War,” she said once. “You couldn't have done it, as a matter of fact, unless I'd been a poor little female Hindu; but, for the sake of argument . . . Suppose we had been married and you went out and had been taken

prisoner—there were thousands of cases like that—we should have stuck the four years' separation, and now would scarcely ever think of it. Let us call it a war."

"Compared with the one I went through," he laughed, "this promises to be a damned comfortable War. You won't live for days and nights in wet clothes, with beastly things exploding all around you, and sometimes hitting you and hurting you like hell; and you won't have to pretend that the bit of jelly that you are from your brain to your heels is an iron rod, so as to bluff a lot of other poor devils into the belief that it's really a Sunday school treat or a garden party. And prisons! My God! German prison-camps! You're right, darling, we'll look on it as a War—and I'll wallow in it."

Yet, when she lay shiveringly awake at night, she would creep across the cabin to the bed in which he was sleeping, and take him all in her arms and, awaking him, say:

"Oh, Buddy darling, tell me I'm doing right. Tell me you don't hate me for making you do this. You can stick it, can't you? If you can't, I can't, either. If you like, I'll jump overboard with you tomorrow."

And Buddy would hold her close and comfort her. Never to shorn lamb was the wind more divinely tempered.

When sheer physical constriction in the narrow couch forbade the relaxation necessary to slumber, she would creep back to her own bed and sleep till morning. Then she would arise, and stand before him a dusky dream of dawn.

"I wasn't too much of a damn little fool in the night, was I?"

"You?"

And he would say the words of foolishness of which no man need ever repent.

When nearing Cherbourg she stood with him, watching the shore, her arm in his.

"It's the last chance, Buddy. You can land here and be safe."

"What should I get out of it?" he asked.

"Your liberty."

"Possibly. But I should lose you."

She shook her head. "You couldn't—now."

"The outside of you would remain mine," he replied. "But the inside—the something that matters to me far more than life and liberty, would be gone. You may say 'No' out of loyalty until you're black in the face. But I know. I've only one way of making good in your eyes—and in my own. Then, please God, we'll see life in the same focus. It may be an optical delusion; but, so long as we're both deluded and both satisfied till the end of things, we'll be happy."

She shivered. "'I'm a woman, and therefore full of fears.' I forget who wrote that—or something like it. Sometimes it's a silly thing to be a woman: always up against the unexpected."

He pressed her close to him and smiled down on her.

"Would you like me to land? Wouldn't it spoil everything?"

"If only you can stick it and come out the same. That's my terror."

"I stuck the War—as I've already told you—and came through it all right. And there wasn't you at the end of it."

When the gangway was drawn up from the tender and the engines of the great ship began to throb again, she drew him away from the side.

"If you had got off, I should have gone with you —with a load off my heart. But it would only have been light for a week. Now I thank God you didn't."

They had an affecting little scene in a corner of the smoking-room, whither they retired, at the end of which Buddy, lighting a cigarette, made his final debonair confession.

"I know I'm a silly ass, my dear. But remember that a silly ass, when roused, turns into an obstinate mule."

At Southampton, amid preparations for landing, a middle-aged man, inconspicuously dressed, came up to Buddy and Diana.

"Sir Atherton Drake?"

"No," said Buddy, "my name's Brotherton. Sir Brotherton Drake. Here is my passport."

The man glanced at it and returned it.

"Could we have a few words together?"

"Certainly," said Buddy, and led the way to the great empty drawing-room. "Your name?"

"Inspector Moggeridge of Scotland Yard."

"This is my wife, Lady Drake," said Buddy. "She knows everything that's to be known, which is a lot more than you can say, inspector. Do sit down."

"I have a warrant for your arrest, as Sir Atherton Drake," said Inspector Moggeridge. "You left England for America in January under a false name —Brotherton. Those are our instructions. It was thought in certain quarters that you wouldn't return to England. I needn't go into details. But when we got word from the New York police that you were coming back, also in a false name, we were bound to take action."

"Why?" asked Buddy. "What are the grounds,

or reasons or whatever you may call it, of your warrant?"

"Defence of the Realm Act. Communication with the Enemy."

"But I'm not Sir Atherton Drake," said Buddy with a smile. "I'm his twin brother, Brotherton Drake, the heir to the title. Sir Atherton died last November."

The inspector stared at him in some confusion.

"According to our information, it was Sir Atherton's twin who died in November."

"No," said Buddy. "That's where everybody's wrong. Sir Atherton Drake is dead. I can get you a hundred witnesses to prove that I can't by any possibility be Sir Atherton Drake. I can get them from all over America. Needn't go as far as that. Dr. Selous of Harley Street, the great heart specialist, my brother's medical adviser, will tell you so, in five minutes."

"You may say so. It's not for me, for the moment, to doubt your word," said the inspector courteously.

"But the whole thing is entirely incomprehensible."

"I suppose it is," said Buddy. "But listen. In a few words, this is what happened." He told him rapidly. "And my only reason for coming back to England is to give myself up for whatever the crime may be of impersonation."

The inspector was staggered by the unexpectedness of the criminal situation.

"That's my case," said Buddy cheerfully. "What are you going to do about it?"

The inspector prescribed summary appearance before chiefs of Scotland Yard on his arrival in London.

"That's what I anticipated," said Buddy. "But I hope you'll let Lady Drake and myself travel in comfort? No handcuffs and that sort of thing."

The inspector laughed. "Of course not.' It's understood that you'll accompany me, on arrival at Waterloo, to Scotland Yard."

"Quite understood, inspector. I know that you and your people will see that I don't slip away in the meanwhile."

Inspector Moggeridge rose, bowed to Diana and left them. Diana said, with a queer proud glance at him :

"Again I thank God you didn't land at Cherbourg."

