

### CHAPTER III

THE early nightmare was over. Dr. Selous had long since gone. Bronson's wife, a woman, apparently, of all the efficiencies, had taken charge of reverential rites. Sir Atherton Drake, sixth baronet—to all the world, henceforward, Brotherton Drake—lay in everlasting peace, on the bed in one of the calm and cold spare-rooms. Everything had been done in decency and order. And Brotherton, *alias* Buddy Drake to all the world, henceforward, Sir Atherton Drake—sixth baronet—sat before the library fire, half stupefied by the happenings of the past few hours.

It was three o'clock in the morning. He had sat there, goodness knew how long. Mrs. Bronson had asked whether she should sit up in the death-chamber. He had forbidden such sacrifice. He himself would keep vigil. He had dismissed her.

He had gone alone into the room and gazed down on the inscrutably serene features of his counterpart, seeking in them he scarce knew what. By all the traditions, by nearly all precedents, he and the dead man should have been knit together in the closest bonds of sympathy and affection. Yet all their lives they had lived apart, almost labelled "The Good Twin" and "The Bad Twin"; and the ways of each had been incomprehensible to the other. He had shivered in the room, bare as a sepulchre. The clothes that the dead man had worn were nowhere

visible. Mrs. Bronson had taken them decently away. The contents of the pockets she had brought into the library. There they lay, in a pitiful heap, on the writing-table.

Buddy rose, and put some coals on the fire. They seemed to be unreal coals and an unreal fire. He himself, clad in unreal garments, seemed to be waiting, as in some fantastic station waiting-room, for an unreal train to come in and take him anywhere. It scarcely occurred to him to go to bed. His brain shrank from formulating the significance of what he had so crazily and desperately done. He had only the intense consciousness of the death of his own past and the assumption of a past but vaguely known, and of a double and bewildering present. Through that consciousness ran the thrill of a future assured from the hopeless poverty of the past few years, which but a few hours ago had seemed the portion appointed for the rest of his life.

His conscience pricked him now and then. In assuming Atherton's personality was he doing him a second great wrong? In what way? Was he robbing Atherton's heirs? Impossible. Atherton had neither chick nor child. Would he be injuring his good name? With the chance provided him, Buddy could live as clean and honourable a life as any man. Was he posing before society as a man of bogus title?

It was only at this point of his reflections that the grotesque humour of the situation occurred to him.

In spite of all the solemnities he had to break into half-hysterical laughter. By his brother's death the baronetcy devolved automatically on himself. Until he died he would be indubitably Sir Brotherton Drake, seventh baronet.

He was stealing no title. Rather giving one away; an action more or less evocative of conscious virtue. In any case, whether he were Sir Atherton or Sir Brotherton, what did it matter? As Sir Brotherton he would be penniless; as Sir Atherton he could enter into the enjoyment of Atherton's fortune.

Eventually he fell asleep in an arm-chair before the fire.

The servants awakened him at dawn and brought him tea. Bronson prepared a bath, and set clothes for the day, a dark suit and a black tie. At eight he breakfasted. Later came a discreet man, with necessary papers to be filled up, and a notebook for the entering of instructions. There was a family vault in a Hampshire churchyard, where, with many other departed Drakes, his father and mother lay. His father had been the last squire of the place, house and lands having been sold to pay off the mortgages and innumerable debts of the notorious though genial evil liver.

Atherton should lie with his fathers, said Buddy. He would be the sole mourner; for, as far as he knew, his brother had no friends in England. The discreet man undertook all the necessary arrangements. Buddy breathed more freely when he had gone.

Presently Dr. Selous ran in, on an anxious flying visit, and counselled the removal of his brother's poor remains to a mortuary. The undertaker ought to have suggested it. Buddy shivered at the thought. Atherton must remain in his own place till the end.

"No, no," he said, "it goes against the grain."

"Then you must clear out. Staying here will get on your nerves. It can't do any good, and your nerves will do your heart a devil of a lot of harm.

Go down to Newstead for a day or two, and take the car over from there to Hillthorpe for the funeral."

Now Newstead was Atherton's little country-place—somewhere in Hampshire. What it was like, what set of servants ran it, Buddy didn't know. A copy of "Who's Who" ferreted out of a New York Public Library had given him practically all his information about Atherton.

He put aside the suggestion. Newstead was too far. Look at the November rain. No.

"Perhaps as well," said the doctor. "By the way, how's the neuritis?"

He touched Buddy's arm and Buddy replied vaguely:

"About the same."

"Anyhow, don't sleep here," said the doctor. "Take a room at an hotel—Claridge's—or the Club."

"That's a much better idea," cried Buddy. "I'll sleep out."

The advice coincided with his own impulses. He couldn't be easy master of the house while Atherton was still there. Except for the sleep of sheer fatigue, as on the preceding night, he couldn't sleep at peace in the usurped bed. There were some cynical aspects of his position which revolted him.

On the other hand, the suggestion of a bed at the Athenæum tickled his sense of humour. He had all kinds of astonishing facts to realize. He, Buddy Drake, professional pariah, all of whose worldly goods were lying in an unspeakable bedroom off Waterloo Station, was a member of the Athenæum, and could avail himself of all its august and solemn privileges. But he did not feel equal yet to the ordeal of meeting the strange faces of men to whom he was intimately familiar. Fancy entering the lobby or entrance hall,

and being clapped on the back by an earnest fellow, reeking of brains and prosperity, and asked :

"Ah, my dear Sir Atherton, you're the very man I wanted to meet. You can tell me all about this new movement. . . ."

No, he must walk slowly and warily. Although his resemblance to Atherton was perfect enough to deceive Selous, the Bronsons and the lift-man—and presumably anyone of Atherton's acquaintance—yet there were a million opportunities for him to give himself hopelessly away. The more he considered the consequences of his lunatic action, the more formidable appeared this elementary danger. By signing the papers which the dreadful man had brought him that morning he had falsified registers, committed a dreadful offence and had placed himself henceforward in peril of his personal liberty.

"Luncheon is ready, Sir Atherton," said Bronson.

There was an omelette, light and golden ; there were cutlets that melted in the mouth ; there was a rich veined Stilton and a glass of port such as men like Bronson pour out with reverence. Even one more such meal, thought Buddy, would compensate for a year's skilly in prison.

When Bronson brought in the coffee, Buddy said :

"Dr. Selous doesn't want me to sleep here—until things are over. You understand, Bronson."

"Perfectly, Sir Atherton."

"So get me a room at Claridge's, and put up what I need. I'll go out before dinner."

"I think it's the best thing you can do, Sir Atherton," said the old servant.

When Bronson had gone, the echo of his words came back to his ear, and with them came back his youth of careless comfort—when he had said to the manservant of the time, perhaps Bronson himself :

"Put up my things for the week-end. In case I'm hoicked off to church, stick in a morning-coat."

In ways like this, he was but returning to his own kingdom.

Atherton Drake was one of those men who chain themselves to a bunch of keys. Buddy, who couldn't chain himself to anything, had always regarded keys as forces malignantly inimical. No sooner had they turned locks than they either broke the mechanism or they vanished. For years Buddy had not possessed a key. He believed in the simplification of life. But now he had been chained by Bronson to Atherton's bunch; and what they opened he knew not.

One thing, however, must be opened, and that was the drawers of the writing-table. They must contain information essential to the understanding of Atherton's affairs. As yet he knew nothing about them. Suddenly confronted by this blank wall of ignorance, he stood aghast. For a few moments he cursed his act of insanity, now practically irremediable. He was floundering into a misty morass, with pitfalls at every step. What did he know of the Elijah whose mantle he had so crazily usurped? Little more than nothing. Yet that little was accurate, since it comprised the facts originally drafted by Atherton himself, and edited by him, edition after edition, in "Who's Who." Buddy had copied it in New York and the sheet of paper was in his old letter-case; the most useless of documents, by the way, at the present moment, seeing that the fat red current volume of the book stood on the writing-table in company with other works of reference: Whitaker's Almanack, the Statesman's Year Book, the Post Office Guide, and Bradshaw. He turned up the name in "Who's Who"—an edition a year later than the one he had con-

sulted in New York—and found the same information.

Atherton had retired from politics, having been beaten in the last General Election, up to which time he had held minor office in Coalition and Conservative Governments. He had published three or four scholarly books: "The Sociology of Periclean Athens," "Longinus and his Epoch." . . . Buddy's comments on this bibliography were modern, succinct and profane. Who the hell was Longinus?

This, after all, was by the way. Until he opened those drawers the essential problem would remain unsolved: How did Atherton earn his living? How, with a patrimony equal to his own, twenty thousand pounds in cash, had he managed to lead a life of luxury, keeping up this flat in Park Lane, and a place in the country—"Newstead Park, Newstead, Hampshire," so please you—according to "Who's Who"? The salaries of Parliamentary Secretaries are modest: the stipend, honorarium, or whatever it is called, of four hundred a year as Member of Parliament is frittered away, in a constituency, on appeals for funds by every conceivable charity: The Broken-Winded New Forest Trombone Players' Benevolent Society; the Hampshire Unexpectant Mothers' League—Buddy thought he knew all about it. Anyhow, there was no money to be made out of English politics. Also books about ancient Greek epochs couldn't possibly be best sellers. The twenty-line paragraph gave no hint of interest in commercial pursuits. The problem remained. How the devil did the fellow, make his money?

Well, there was a bunch of keys, and there was a set of half a dozen locked drawers.

It was just after lunch. He rang for Bronson and gave his orders. To personal callers and telephone-

callers he was out. Bronson might receive messages and deliver them when summoned. His privacy for the rest of the afternoon must be inviolate.

"Yes, Sir Atherton; but, pardon me, Sir Atherton, if Mrs. Flower should ring up?"

"I don't care whether it's the Queen of Rumania or Joan of Arc," cried Buddy, "I'm not in."

"Yes, Sir Atherton," said Bronson in a flat voice.

He went out, but the flatness of the tone struck Buddy's sensitive ear. He had made a mistake. The correct Atherton wouldn't have dragged in Joan of Arc. And who, in the name of the Fantastic, was Mrs. Flower? That didn't matter. The immediate future offered him a surfeit of food for speculation.

He found the key and opened the drawer from which Atherton had taken the cheque-book on the previous evening. It contained also a bank pass-book, a set of passed cheques held together by a rubber band, and neatly docketed bundles of correspondence. The pass-book showed a credit balance of over five thousand pounds. The entries on the credit side were mainly those of dividends on investments. Here and there as he turned over the pages appeared cash entries of large sums. The debit side also showed payments of large amounts. On reference to the cancelled cheques, he found that the payments were made to Messrs. Burton, Thane and Co, of Throgmorton Street, and a casual glance at a set of docketed letters informed him that the latter were Atherton's stockbrokers.

He opened the other drawers, and found many interesting documents. One dated a few weeks back was an autograph list of investments with the current market price attached. The total value was £198,000.

Buddy blinked at the figures and, deciding that such a revelation could not be endured unalcoholically,



rose and crossed to the electric bell. There he halted, paralysed by a thought. It could not possibly be in accord with Atherton's habits to ring for whisky and soda in the middle of the afternoon. He relaxed and sighed. If women must suffer to be beautiful, so men must suffer to be rich. He resigned himself to suffering and went back to the table.

He went through tidy masses of correspondence. Some of it related to the upkeep of Newstead Park; some of it to financial transactions in which his vagabond mind groped blindly; some of it was couched in equally unintelligible legal phraseology.

The most startling find was a fourfold parchment document, heavily engraved in black ink, which purported to be the Last Will and Testament of Sir Atherton Drake, Baronet. It was dated about a year before. Buddy opened it with shaky fingers. Atherton was dead. His estate belonged to his beneficiaries. Buddy felt physically sick. It hadn't occurred to him that he was committing fraud on a colossal scale. His dreams of wealth vanished, like those of the gentleman in "The Arabian Nights" who kicked over his basket. His vagrant life had so inured him to thinking only ten minutes ahead of the present moment that, at the mad moment of substitution of identity, he had had but that brief span of time in his mind. Even last night and this morning, he had not thought very lucidly ahead. Atherton had warned him that by will he would inherit nothing. Atherton had rubbed in the conception of a will, a conception as remote from Buddy's mentality as that of making a railway from Pole to Pole.

Had Atherton died without pronouncing the fatal words, he would not have dreamed of impersonation, being assured in his simplicity that he would inherit his brother's estate.

And now he handled the cold calf-skin document. To the touch it conveyed the clamminess of death. He could scarcely dare unfold it. But he must.

Disentangled from legal verbiage, the following testamentary dispositions grew clear to his astounded mind :

Three hundred a year for life to his manservant, Augustus Bronson.

Newstead Park and a capital sustentation fund of £50,000 to be administered by Trustees nominated by Trinity College, Cambridge, for the maintenance of an Academia of Scholars devoted to the study of Platonic Philosophy.

To Miss Cora Blenkinsop of 34 Turtle Road, Ealing, £7000.

To Edgar Fry, his sole executor, £2000.

The entire residue of his estate to the funds of the Conservative Party.

This precious document had been drawn up by Messrs. Fry, Bilson and Fry, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, Atherton's solicitors, as Buddy had gathered from other correspondence.

He pencilled the salient points on a bit of paper, after reading the thing through several times. Then, when he had finally grasped its significance—for, as he had muttered, "There must be some ghastly catch in it, somewhere"—he broke into the foolish, hysterical laughter of reaction.

The funds of the Conservative Party. What did he care about the Conservative Party? Was it a widow or an orphan or a poor devil down on his luck? No. To hell with the Conservative Party. It was splitting with money like an overfried sausage.

The Newstead Park Academia? Plato? Buddy

had dim memories of fifth-form school-days—certainly not from war-interrupted Cambridge days—of the Academy of Florence and Lorenzo de' Medici and the fugitive Greeks from Byzantium and groves of Platonic philosophy—whatever groves and Platonic philosophy might mean. Newstead Park, a kind of sanatorium for brainy ebriates who should pass their lives in futile study of the mildewed theories of thousands of years ago—Buddy had no scholar's appreciation of a millennium or two—the idea was insane! The projected Platonic Academy could accompany the Conservative Party to whatever Fahrenheit temperature of Inferno might suit their respective tastes.

Bronson—he himself could make things right with Bronson—to say nothing of his wife whom Atherton seemed to have forgotten.

Two thousand pounds to Fry. He passed it over for the time, being.

There remained the seven thousand to Cora Blenkinsop. She was an Enigma. Certainly she had nothing to do with the Family. And she lived in Turtle Road, Ealing—a far cry from the Platonic Academia of Newstead Park. His unregenerate mind leaped at the incongruity. Before his eyes flashed the headlines of an American newspaper:

“Platonic home of Cora in Turtle Road.”

“Good Lord,” said Buddy, “I wonder if the poor old chap was human after all.”

He considered the question soberly. He owed this woman, whoever she was, £7000. Thus, as far as he could see, his liabilities as the usurper of Sir Atherton Drake's fortune amounted to nine thousand pounds plus three hundred a year to Bronson.

He lay back in his leather-covered library chair, his thumbs in waistcoat armholes in a satisfied contemplation of the Universe. A sentence whose origin

is lost in the mists of Renaissance theologians occurred to his mind, "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb."

Buddy rose and stared into the great library fire. There was something in the saying, "something blessedly profound and true. If ever there had been a shorn lamb, he was one. He had been on the point of perishing from the icy blasts of a beastly world, when, all of a sudden, owing to a providential turn round a God-established corner, the wind was tempered, and here he was, a comfortably warm lamb, luxuriously sheltered.

He pressed an electric button. He would put his shelter to the test. On the appearance of Bronson, he said, with his actor's note and gesture :

"I'm feeling a little bit . . . er . . . I think a little brandy . . ."

Bronson stepped forward with an air of concern.

"Some of the old liqueur brandy or a brandy and soda, Sir Atherton?"

Buddy chose the latter, and presently Bronson brought it in on a salver. Buddy breathed more freely; he was not outraging the Atherton tradition. He felt more sheltered than ever.

The next discovery was of solid value: some hundred and fifty pounds in notes in a discreetly hidden drawer, which had its own special key. That would enable him to carry on for a while, until he could find a solution to the greatest of all practical problems. For the first time in his life of unreflection it occurred to him that wealth in this modern world was guarded not by strong-rooms and bolts and bars, but by that individual scrawl on a bit of paper, which is a man's signature. Except for this lucky find he could not extract a penny from his usurped estate without writing on a bit of paper the words "Atherton Drake," in the late Atherton Drake's handwriting.

Suddenly he remembered Selous's query that morning, "How's the neuritis?" It suggested all kinds of possibilities. He would cultivate that neuritis for all it was worth. How could a man write properly with his fingers all stiffened into sticks? To the shorn lamb there was the breath of summer in the wind.

Atherton's car—*his* car—took him later to the dreadful hotel where he had engaged his room the day before. The dingy proprietor showed no astonishment at his spruce transformation. He paid his bill, the Boots put his old suit-case into the car, and he drove away. He drove to Claridge's, where the hall staff greeted him by name and expressed pleasure at seeing him once more. The contrast in the two hostelries was grotesque in its vastness. He laughed all the way up in the lift.

In his comfortable suite he found the attendant Bronson. What would he wear? Tails or dinner-jacket? Buddy, in democratic America, had not worn a dress-suit for years. His heart suddenly yearned for a tail-coat, white waistcoat, white tie.

"God, I feel clean," he said, when he had finished dressing and looked at himself in the glass.

He would dine early, downstairs, he told Bronson. He might go on somewhere. Bronson needn't wait.

"Very good, Sir Atherton. I've put your drops on the table by the bed."

Buddy nodded in what he conjectured was the take-it-for-granted Athertonian manner, and went out. In the little vestibule hung the hat, fur coat and silk scarf of evening ceremony, and from the coat pocket peeped a pair of white gloves.

He dined in the great, shaded room, discreetly filled, at that early hour, only with theatre parties. The delicacies of scent and sound, the glimmer of women's dresses, of bare arms and shoulders, the daintiness of

tables, the deftly moving forms of liveried serving-men, that strange mingling of the dignity and the froth of life, so characteristic of London—all the sweet wonder of things for which his starved soul had ached, there filling it to plenitude, so that the mere material food that he ate was but a delicious item in the grand banquet of the senses.

To get back to this world, considered but twenty-four hours ago as lost for ever, it was intoxicating, worth the commission of any technical crime and its vastly unpleasant technical consequences.

Hot dogs and Hamburgers at a filthy counter in a filthy shack in St. Louis, Syracuse, any old purlieu on the outskirts of American civilization, had been his portion for the last few abhorrent years; together with foul linen, old and hateful clothes, coarse associates, men and women, honest in their way—often in their way heroic—but men and women, in all their ways far flung from the caste into which he was born.

A girl from a distant table caught his eye, and smiled recognition. He acknowledged her sign. She was one of Atherton's friends. One of his friends. Who she was he didn't know. It didn't matter. He had magically re-entered the charmed circle in which such women have their being.

He fingered the stiff white piqué bow of his tie. God, how wonderful.

Yet, supposing he had met the girl face to face and she had spoken to him? How would he have answered her? He realized that his joy was a fearful one and must be taken very seriously.

After dinner he went to a theatre—a gay revue, and again his heart was full of gladness.

During the interval, he was smoking a cigarette in the lounge, when he received a shock of an unanticipated kind. A man in an untidy dinner-suit looked

at him for a minute, and then his features broadened into a grin.

"Why, Buddy, who'd have thought of seeing you here?"

Buddy recognized him as one Thompson, a fellow "extra" in Hollywood days, and fortunately with no claim on his friendship. His heart seemed to stand still. It is a ghastly ordeal for a man to deny his identity. He met the salutation, however, with a blank yet polite stare.

"I beg your pardon."

"But you're Buddy Drake——"

Buddy smiled. "My name is Drake; but I'm Atherton Drake. You're mistaking me for my twin brother, Brotherton."

Thompson apologized. The resemblance was startling. But now he saw the difference.

"You'll pardon me, sir."

"Of course, of course! The most natural thing in the world."

Buddy laughed and, as the curtain bell was ringing, left him with a courteous wave of the hand, and went back to his stall.

After all, it was easier, he reflected, to deny knowledge of Brotherton's acquaintances than to assume knowledge of Atherton's.

That night he slept like a tired dog.

Bronson woke him the next morning, bringing with him a bundle of letters. Buddy sat up in bed and opened them nervously: a couple of bills, a couple of receipts; a letter from Atherton's stock-brokers suggesting a change of investments; a card of invitation to the Annual Dinner of the Royal Philological Society, with a request from the Hon. Secretary that he would respond to the toast of "The Guests"; a note from one Kate Rowlands asking him down for the week-end

after next to "Friary Court," and addressed from Cadogan Gardens; an estimate from his "respectfully, John Smithers," for projected repairs at Newstead Park; and finally a pencilled missive which made Buddy scratch a puzzled head.

This last ran:

DEAREST,—

I must see you. Let me know where and when. It's awfully urgent. M.

It was the fly-leaf of a sheet of notepaper without an address on it.

Buddy confided to himself the fact that he was damned. How could he communicate with "M," without knowing her name or address?

The envelope bore the Brighton postmark. The paper was thick and expensive, the handwriting cultivated. "M" was a lady of some quality, at any rate. But who was she?

He was half turning over in his mind the possibility of retiring with the least possible disgrace from an intolerable position, when his eye fell on *The Times*.

The undertaker, yesterday morning, had suggested relieving him from the labour of making the customary announcement. What he now read he himself had dictated. There it was:

DRAKE. On November 7th, suddenly, in London, Brotherton, younger son of the late Sir Michael Drake, Bt.

He was dead. *The Times* said so.

There was no question of retiring. He must see it through. Yet, he felt afraid.