

CHAPTER IV

THE uncanny nervous strain had relaxed. Atherton Drake was laid to rest with his fathers, and Buddy, master of his possessions, reigned in his stead. It was a week since he had landed at Southampton with six pounds eight shillings and sevenpence and a gold watch and chain for all his fortune. Now he found himself a man of ample means, with the wide world spread before him, for his enjoyment. If only he could enjoy it. For he walked with Fear, and slept with Fear, which of nights awakened him to shivers of clammy sweat. So far all had gone well. How long would it last? He brought all the armoury of his mercurial nature and love of life to face the Fear.

The wind, however, continued to be tempered by a kindly Providence. Sudden bereavement and notorious ill-health accounted for immediate retirement from social life. Severe neuritis excused the use of a typewriter in polite correspondence, and accounted for any possible variation of signature. As in physical appearance, and in voice, so in handwriting the brothers were strangely alike. The main differences lay in the scrawling habit of the one and the neat precision of the other. Buddy found this out after many hours' sinful practice in the dead of night, when Bronson had gone to bed, and there was a bright fire in the library in which sheets of signatures could be destroyed. He passed a minute of sweating terror

when first he stood at the bank counter and passed across a cheque to self for fifty pounds, all filled up, save for the signature, in typescript.

"How will you have it, Sir Atherton?" asked the cashier.

His knees sagged beneath him, and he broke into an hysterical giggle. It was not even worth while telling the cashier about his neuritis.

Encouraged in this experiment in taking bulls by horns, he made a telephone appointment with Mr. Edgar Fry, of Messrs. Fry, Bilson and Fry, Atherton's solicitors.

Mr. Fry, senior partner, elderly, bald, clean-shaven, rubicund and genial, received him heartily.

"So glad to see you, Drake. Do take off your overcoat if you find it too warm here. I'm a chilly soul and it's a beast of a day outside. I saw the announcement of Brotherton's death. I thought of writing to you, but—well, you know—"

"Yes, yes," said Buddy.

"After all, perhaps—nobody's enemy but his own. *De mortuis et cetera.*"

"Quite so," said Buddy. "He seemed to find amusement in chucking away his life."

The solicitor sighed in acquiescence. Then:

"What can I do for you, my dear fellow?"

Buddy came straight to his point.

"I find I can't live in this confounded climate any longer."

"I know I wouldn't if I could help it," said the solicitor. "Where are you thinking of going?"

Buddy was vague. He had thought of the South of France, South America, Sumatra—and other sunny places where Atherton's cronies and acquaintances would be unlikely to congregate.

"I'm thinking of giving up England, anyhow for

some years," he said. "But there's that country place of mine, Newstead Park—in my absence what's the good of it?"

"You might let it."

"Or sell it."

"Quite so," said Fry.

Buddy felt relieved. His confidential solicitor regarded the sale of Newstead Park as a normal proposition. It was on this business he had come.

"Do you think you could find a purchaser?"

"I could put it into the hands of agents who doubtless could do so."

"I wish you would," Buddy said fervently. "To tell you a secret, I hate the place."

Fry laughed discreetly. "I thought you would when you bought it. But you said something about dimly foreseen eventualities. . . ."

"They haven't eventualized," said Buddy at random.

Fry nodded and said he was glad to hear it. What the devil did he mean by that? thought Buddy. Had Atherton at any time been contemplating marriage?

"Well then, that's fi—that's settled." He corrected himself, for the academic Atherton wouldn't have said "fixed." He went on, "How much do you think the place will fetch?"

Fry regarded him humorously. "Considering your improvements and the altered value of money, I should say about £6000 less than you paid for it."

Buddy translated instinctively the transatlantic "Oh hell" into an Athertonian "Dear, dear. I hope you're wrong." It was grotesquely difficult to live up to Atherton. Was such a life worth living? His shoulders shrugged imperceptibly. "We'll see what offers we get. For the time being I'll leave everything in your hands."

A few minutes later he rose. "That's about all," he said.

"By the way," said Fry, with a detaining gesture, "what about the will?"

"Oh, yes, the will. Well?"

Buddy was there to receive, not to give, information. "The death of Miss—Miss Blenkinsop, wasn't it?"

Buddy nodded. "Yes, Cora Blenkinsop."

He listened to the ensuing explanation almost in a dream. The mysterious lady of Turtle Road was dead. Atherton had asked the firm to send him the will, usually in their custody, so that he could look it over in view of necessary changes.

He no longer owed the lady of Turtle Road £7000. The mere question of the money was neither here nor there. It was the method of paying the debt of honour that had worried him. Now the poor thing was dead. The Lord once more had tempered the wind to His shorn lamb's conscience.

If only he could subtly induce Fry to tell him who the late Cora Blenkinsop of Turtle Road, Ealing, had been in the flesh. She could have been an ancient retainer of the Drake family; he would have remembered her name. A naughty lady? Possibly. But what could such a dry stick as Atherton, companion of Archbishops and friend of erudite dons, as his correspondence proved, have to do with naughty ladies? On the solicitor's lips he observed the ghost of a dry, satirical smile. If only he could choke out of the man his knowledge of Atherton's private affairs. He assumed an air of melancholy.

"Poor thing," he sighed.

"Yes," said Fry in acquiescence, "poor thing."

Which didn't get him any further.

Again he rose. "I'll have to think over the will

again. I'm not at all satisfied with it as it stands. It'll need radical alterations."

He parted from Mr. Edgar Fry with what he conceived to be Athertonian cordiality, drove home in the car, and put the absurd will in the fire. The only debt that could possibly worry him now was the £2000 to Edgar Fry. The Platonic Academy was non-existent, and the Conservative Party, or, for the matter of that, any political party, deserved to be. His conscience was unruffled. As for Fry, one of these days he could get hold of a wad of untraceable foreign notes to the value of £2000, slip them into an envelope and post them anonymously to Fry. He might get some woman somewhere, with a feminine hand, to write on a scrap of paper: "From a grateful client." He chuckled at the thought of the hair-tearing puzzlement it would afford the elderly senior partner of Messrs. Fry, Bilson and Fry, of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

If there had not been a Puckish element in Buddy he would not have changed clothes with Atherton.

On his way home, his mind being still concerned with his moral responsibilities under the will, his eye caught the sign on a building which announced it the home of a great insurance company. He stopped the car and entered. No business under the sun could have been more simply transacted.

After lunch, he spoke to Bronson.

"I've come to the conclusion," he said, "that I can't live in England any longer. I'm selling Newstead."

"I can't say I'm sorry to hear it, Sir Atherton."

Buddy glowed. As both Fry and Bronson commended his intention, he gathered Newstead Park must be a beast of a place.

"I never really liked it."

"All right in fine weather in summer, but damp

and exposed and, if you'll excuse me, Sir Atherton, the more modern improvements you put in, the more it tumbles down."

"Just so," said Buddy. "How old are you, Bronson?"

Bronson looked surprised at the question. His age? Fifty-five.

"How long have you been with the Family?"

"Over thirty years, Sir Atherton."

"A long time."

"It is, indeed. I remember giving poor Mr. Brotherton his first fishing lesson. Sir Michael had given him a rod on his sixth birthday."

Buddy turned away with a smothered "Good God." He had forgotten all about it. Now he remembered. The cloud-flecked April sky. The bit of dark, narrow water, with banks clear of bushes. His excited and clumsy efforts to throw with his toy rod. The cast made by Bronson—the rod thrust into his hands—the sudden vibration that thrilled all down his spine into his toes, as he realized, from Bronson's cries, that he had got one. The winding up of the reel, the sight of the little trout's head as it appeared at the other end of the arch made by rod and line—the agonized rapture of landing the two-ounce fish. That supreme ecstasy of his young life—he had forgotten that it was to Bronson that he owed it. He had ever been an ungrateful dog. If only he could stretch out both hands to Bronson and cry, "Of course I remember. Wasn't it wonderful?" But he was the unsportsmanlike Atherton, and must maintain but a tepid interest in poor Brotherton's young adventure. So he spoke with a glowing heart hidden beneath a mask of cool urbanity.

"I know. I know, my old friend. Such loyal services as yours are hard to repay. In fact, there

can't be any question of repayment. There can only be a question of your share in the family fortunes."

"I don't quite understand you, Sir Atherton," said Bronson with a puzzled knitting of the brow.

Buddy waved a slightly despairing hand.

"The time has come, Bronson, when we must part. You know what my life is. I may live another few years, or I may go out at any moment like my poor brother. I have you to consider. I've been thinking of leaving you an annuity under my will——"

Bronson murmured his thanks.

"But I think it would be better if I settled it on you now. I'm giving up Newstead and this flat, and I'm going abroad—to travel all over the world and see what I can before I die. I shall take with me a strong male nurse—a retired R.A.M.C. man—who will also act as my valet and secretary." A darn useful sort of fellow, thought Buddy, to whom this imaginary paragon suddenly leapt into the light of a practical possibility. "And so you see, Bronson, there would be no place for Mrs. Bronson and yourself in my life."

"I needn't say, Sir Atherton, that what you tell me is a great shock to me."

"It's a wrench to me, Bronson, I admit," said Buddy, "but life is full of these damned jolts. You and I, hitherto, have been singularly free from them. But they are bound to come. Now, under my will, I was about to leave you £300 a year for the rest of your life."

Bronson gave a little gasp. "That's more than generous of you, sir. Of course I have a few savings and Mrs. Bronson and I——"

"Yes, yes, naturally. But that's not the point. The point is that I'm going out into space far away from you, so I'm practically dead as far as you are concerned. So I propose either to buy you your

annuity now from an insurance company or give you in cash what they call the present value of it."

He drew from his pocket the papers he had brought from the insurance company, and ran his finger down the tabulated figures.

"You see—age fifty-five. Annuity of £300 a year. Cost about £4000. Take the papers, my dear Bronson, and talk it over with your wife and any business friend, and let me know in a day or two. And I think you might bring me a brandy and soda."

Bronson departed, perfect in demeanour, but muddled in brain. He returned with a decanter labelled "Whisky" and a bottle of Salutaris water. When mildly rebuked for error, he apologized.

"I'm upset, Sir Atherton. That's what it is. I never expected anything of the kind. Thank you, Sir Atherton. Indeed, I never expected it."

Buddy, drinking the brandy and soda with which Bronson speedily returned, wiped a damp forehead. He thanked God that he had rid himself honourably of Bronson, a perpetual danger. And yet he had twinges of conscience. That first little trout! Men who are so inextricably interwoven with one's destiny should not be ruthlessly torn out of it and thrown to the winds. He sighed. It was a cynical world. After all, with £4000, a man could afford to choose the wind most favourable to his purposes. Buddy left it at that. Even had he been the super-sentimentalist, he could scarcely carry Bronson and his wife with him round the world and into all its odd corners where he hoped to lead a full and enjoyable life, untrammelled by the conventions that were part and parcel, inside and outside, of the late Sir Atherton Drake. There came a time when every man must look out for himself. That time had come both for Buddy and for Bronson.

That evening, when he came home from a theatre, he found, among his practically unanswerable correspondence, a letter in the same handwriting as the pencilled scrawl he had received from Brighton. It was from Paris. It bore the heading of the Hôtel Plaza-Athénée. It was as vague and disturbing as the other, which he had all but forgotten :

DEAREST,—

I can't understand why I've not heard from you. It can only be illness. Of course I realize the dreadful shock of your brother's death. I saw from the newspapers that you had attended his funeral."

"Damn the newspapers," said Buddy.

And I hope to goodness the effort wasn't too much for you. Still you might have asked Bronson to telephone.

Buddy proceeded to damn Bronson.

If you can't write, do tell him to let me know how you are. It's so unlike you, Atherton, to leave me in the air like this.

Buddy was about to take the damnation of Atherton in his stride, when he reflected that the poor chap was dead and possibly already judged.

I *had* to come to Paris, I simply couldn't face it. He got to know, I don't know how, that I was at Brighton, and said that he was coming to have it all out with me. So I took the next boat from Newhaven. A ghastly three-hours' crossing in a gale. And apart from all this I'm feeling rotten in myself.

If I don't get a word from you soon, dearest, I'll go mad.

Diana is with me. We went last night to "Athalie" at the Comédie française—just because you always said I ought to see it. I liked it in a way, but, darling, did it never strike you, as Diana puts it, how singularly unfunny it is?

Buddy, with perplexed brows, but suddenly smiling lips, murmured:

"I find the woman beginning to be sympathetic." Or was it the Diana whom she quoted?

All the same, dear, I love you. If you were fit I should ask you to come over at once and see me, as there are perfectly silly complications, about which I don't want to worry you by letter. But if you can't come just send a message to calm the dreadful anxiety of

Your own devoted

M.

Buddy read the letter several times. The writer was a woman of position. Otherwise she would not have been staying at the Hôtel Plaza-Athénée. She wrote a flowing, cultivated hand. Her loose style denoted breeding. Instinctively he realized that she could not be classed with the late Cora Blenkinsop, of Turtle Road, Ealing. Between Turtle Roads and Palace Hotels stretch impassable social abysses.

But who the devil was she? Obviously she knew her Atherton. Her knowledge was proved by her delicate gibe at his recommendation of the giddy merriment of Racine. It was a serious affair. She loved Atherton and took it for granted that he loved her. And who was *He*, the Terror, before whom she

fled, ill as she was, from Newhaven to Dieppe, in a gale? Father, brother, husband? It could only be a husband, thought Buddy.

What was Atherton doing, anyhow, with another man's wife? Atherton a gay dog? The incongruity of the terms made him laugh. He almost heard his father cry out, "That melancholy pup?"

Yes. Whatever fictitious gaiety had enlivened the relations between Atherton and Cora of Turtle Road, it had little part in those between him and this baffling lady whose bold "M" was like the careless cipher of royalty.

Who was "M"? With all a kindly gentleman's desire in the world to save a lady from undue anxiety, how could he write, wire or telephone to her as "M," Hôtel Plaza-Athénée, Paris? Impossible.

Still more impossible to summon Bronson in aid. Bronson, from the letter's internal evidence, knew all about it. But how could he, even in his most debonair fashion—to say nothing of the fact that the debonair had been omitted from the category of Atherton's social graces—how could he ask Bronson to convey to a lady called "M" any message whatever by any means of communication? Men, in giving orders to their menservants, don't allude to ladies of their acquaintance by the initials of their Christian names.

What was it all about? Again Fear shook him. This time Fear in a different guise. In his folly he had not realized how in the lives of most men, even in the life of so remote and unhuman a man as Atherton, other people's lives are inexplicably involved. His folly, which at first he had regarded only as a technical crime, by which no one was injured, began to grow before him into a crime that might bring hurt and misery into the lives of unknown men and women.

After a stiff brandy and soda, Buddy reviewed his

position and found it untenable. After a second, he reasoned with himself. After a third, he decided to see Edgar Fry in the morning, give him full power of attorney, and book a passage to Japan by the first available boat.

