

## CHAPTER V

**H**AUNTED by the apparently derelict, and mysterious lady, Buddy slept little that night. The more he thought of running away to the other side of the earth and leaving her disconsolate, the more did it seem a scurvy project. If he carried it out he would never look himself gallantly in the face again. He must play the game; though what kind of a game it was to be he could but vaguely conjecture.

In spite of the awful danger of detection and its consequences, he must meet the lady and put himself definitely in the right or the wrong with her. Only then, as a decent human being, could he disappear. And the sooner he did this, the sooner would he be free to wander in far-off lands, lead his own life, and make for himself a set of companions and friends. This he longed to do, for he was beginning to feel intolerably lonely. Now, the only way of meeting the lady forthwith that he could devise was to go to Paris and sit about the lounge of the Hôtel Plaza-Athénée, until she should meet him.

"Atherton!" she would cry, coming forward.

"My dear!" he would say, springing to his feet.

Nothing more natural. Then he could trust to luck.

At five o'clock in the morning the scheme dawned on him as a dim idea. At six it was a firm resolve. At seven he rang for Bronson, who soon appeared with tea.

"I forgot to tell you yesterday that I must go to Paris for a few days. I'm taking the eleven o'clock train."

"If you can stand the journey, Sir Atherton, perhaps it would be just as well."

"What do you mean?" Buddy asked sharply.

With the tiniest kind of a deprecatory shrug and the faintest of smiles, Bronson answered:

"Well, under the circumstances——"

Buddy looked at him in a baffled way. He seemed to be leagued with the lady in a conspiracy of dark sayings. It was impossible to ask him to explain the circumstances.

"You'll see to everything for me," said Buddy, after a gulp of tea. "Packing; tickets; reservations."

"Of course, Sir Atherton. And I'll wire at once to the Hôtel Crillon as usual."

"I hate the Crillon," said Buddy, who had never set foot in that respectable hostelry. "Wire to the Plaza-Athénée."

"We've never stayed there before, Sir Atherton," said Bronson.

"All the more reason for me to go now. Fresh woods and pastures new."

"Very good, Sir Atherton. But I'm afraid I'll be lost in those same new woods, after all the years at the Crillon. Still, I'll do my best."

"You won't have the opportunity of being lost, Bronson, because you won't be there," said Buddy. "I'm going alone." Then, irritated by the astonishment in the man's face, he added petulantly, "I'm sick of being treated as a dangerous invalid. All of you—you, Dr. Selous, and everybody—are quite wrong. I'm as strong as a horse. I can get on quite well by myself. And I'm going to Paris on very special business."

"In a way, I quite understand, Sir Atherton," said Bronson with the resigned air of an undertaker requested not to attend the funeral.

It was only when the train started from Victoria that Buddy, comfortably seated in the Pullman, to which Bronson had mournfully attended him, felt at last a free man: free from piles of unanswered, bewildering correspondence; free from embarrassing encounters in public places; free from Dr. Selous, to divert whose mania for hourly auscultation of his heart seemed a life's work of ingenuity; free from Bronson, whose leech-like devotion was bound sooner or later to suck the blood of his secret; free, for a few hours, from the new Fear.

He was free. His opposite neighbour was a bluff and kindly American, a lawyer from Chicago. They split a bottle of champagne over their noontide chop. It was the first time since his landing in England that Buddy had held unfettered talk with a human being, and he glowed in the joy of it.

They travelled in the same carriage from Calais to Paris. The American, having fought in the War from the first, with the Canadians, had seen as much service as Buddy. They exchanged old memories. America, of which Buddy had a curiously familiar knowledge for an Englishman, provided a vast field of conversation. Buddy felt he had never talked so gaily in his life. He almost forgot the odd quest on which he was bound. He parted from his friend, whose name was Winslow Blaydes, with some reluctance, especially when he learned that he had engaged a room at the Crillon. They arranged to meet, however; so Buddy, drove off from the Gare du Nord cheered by the thought that Paris could furnish at least one companionable soul.

On leaving the desk in the hotel lobby, he broke away from the young official who dangled the keys of the suite ordered by Bronson, and looked around the long lounge still filled with belated tea and cocktail parties; but, as his appearance attracted no especial feminine interest, he followed his guide to the lift, feeling half foolish and half disappointed. If only he had managed to surprise Bronson into a betrayal of the woman's surname! His position was about as lunatic as St. Thomas à Becket's Saracen mother in the streets of London. Even she had the name Gilbert to go by. But if he went about the public rooms of the Plaza-Athénée like a page-boy shouting "M.M.M." he would be looked upon as a disturber of the peace.

Some three-quarters of an hour later he entered the lounge again, this time trim, fresh-shaven, dinner-suited, and sat down at a table near the door to await the probable event of recognition, with a double dry Martini and an evening paper for company. The muffled sound of the dismal melody of "Sonny Boy" came from the *salle à manger* beyond. The room was sparsely filled, it being the hour when theatre-goers were finishing their dinner, and non-theatre-goers, the sedate and elderly who dine in the comparative quiet of their own hotel rather than in the more giddifying restaurants, were just beginning. But he could not read. He was shaken by the struggle between the Fear and his will. He was waiting before gates that must open to unknown, perhaps terrifying adventure. And, in any event, he must comport himself like Atherton—be dull, dry, dignified, unemotional. Also, whatever might be the adventure, there was a woman's heart at stake.

Then the more or less expected happened. A sudden swirl of motion, a curious noiseless vibration

of the air, through the near lounge door and a voice at his side :

“ Well, here you are at last ! ”

According to his imaginary stage directions he leaped to his feet. He smiled.

“ Yes, here I am. I had to come. ”

“ About time too, ” said the lady.

She was a singularly attractive lady wearing a little casque-like hat and a costume of a deep shade of red. She was dark, of the clear olive complexion that shows the flush of the blood ; pretty—more than pretty, with regular features and fine dark eyes that were rather angry ; graceful, rather tall. He judged her age—rightly—at about twenty-five

“ Why on earth you didn't let us know you were coming I can't imagine. And when you did come you left no word at the desk. Here have I been ringing up your room, and of course no reply. So I had to come all the way down again and find you. ”

All that Buddy could gather from this incoherence was the impression that the lady didn't like him.

“ I'm dreadfully sorry, ” he said, thinking of the excuses that Atherton might possibly have made in the circumstances. “ But you know how worried I've been, and of course my health— ”

“ I never saw you look so fit in my life, ” said the lady. “ Look here ”—she suddenly swept the evening paper from the chair on which he had laid it—“ we can't talk standing up like this. I'm dead beat. ” She sat down. “ I want a drink. ”

Buddy caught a waiter's eye.

“ Martini ? ”

“ Yes. ”

He gave the order.

“ You make me tired, Atherton. You've not even asked . . . well, anyhow, you had no means of

knowing . . . my wire reached the flat after you had left. Bronson opened it and wired in reply that you were on your way here. I only got his telegram when I got back, ten minutes ago, from the nursing-home."

"Nursing-home? Good God!" cried Buddy.

What else could kindly and puzzled man say?

"Yes. Operation this morning."

"How is——" He stopped short, not knowing whether he, she, or it had been operated upon.

"Successful, I hope?"

"She's getting on as well as can be expected."

"She" must be the Diana of the letter, for it did not occur to him that his companion was other than the mysterious "M."

"Poor child," he said.

"I think you are the most cold-blooded fish I ever met," she exclaimed with a flash of her eyes. "I never stop wondering how Muriel can put up with you."

"Oh!" said Buddy. "Oh!"

His brain whirled for a moment and suddenly came to a stop. M for Muriel. Muriel was in the nursing-home. This, then, was Diana, eyeing him like a scornful Artemis. On the other hand it might be another intimate friend. Still, he must risk it.

"My dear Diana," he said, touching her hand on the table, "tell me all about it. I'm dreadfully anxious."

She seemed to relent, not drawing her hand away; also she answered to the name of Diana.

"You know how silly she is. She was in awful pain all last week and wouldn't let you know. Didn't want to worry you. There were enough complications already. She didn't tell me much. This morning I had to send for a doctor who diagnosed acute appendicitis and carted her off at once."

She went into such details as were right that the lover of an unhappy lady should know. In the midst of her narrative the waiter brought the cocktails. The end of her story and cocktail coincided.

"I'm about famished," she said.

Buddy waved a hand to the *salle à manger*.

"Let us dine."

"In there? Among all those English and American dowagers in bare flesh and pearls? Looking like a scarlet little *cocotte* in company with the notoriously respectable Sir Atherton Drake, Bart.? No fear. And I'm too hungry to change. Let's go to Fouquet's."

"Anywhere you like so long as it's amusing," laughed Buddy, forgetful of impersonation.

She arched her fine eyebrows.

"Since when have you developed the idea of eating amusingly?"

"It's a natural reaction, I suppose, my dear Diana," replied Buddy, in the Athertonian manner, "against all the very great worries that have lately beset me."

"Allons-y."

She rose from the table. He helped her into discarded furs. Then he had an inspiration.

"First let us telephone to the nursing-home. You can do it from my sitting-room, I've got to go up and get my hat and coat."

Diana agreed to the soundness of the idea, appearing to regard the suggestion as perfectly natural. They mounted in the lift. They entered the sitting-room, furnished in blue silk and imitation satin-wood.

"You'd better ring up, if you don't mind. You know all about it."

When he saw her sitting in telephonic communication with the nursing-home, he prided himself on the craft of a modern Ulysses. He learned from her guileless lips much that he yearned to know. She spoke in

French—French as clear and as crisp as you would hear it at the Odéon.

"The nursing-home? I'm inquiring about Madame Flower. Yes. Flower. Operated for appendicitis. Ah! It's you, Mademoiselle. I'm her sister, Mademoiselle Merrow, speaking. Madame Flower's sister. Yes, yes, of course. Only an hour ago I left. Yes. Yes. That's famous. Listen, Mademoiselle; will you tell her, when she is able to receive news, that Sir Atherton Drake is with me in Paris . . ." etc., etc.

She turned. "She's getting on all right."

"Splendid!" said Buddy.

But he couldn't let her know how really splendid it was. Now he had the names. Mrs. Flower—Miss Diana Merrow. Flower? The sound echoed through his mind. Yes. Some days ago Bronson had said in a flat voice, "Mrs. Flower rang up." He had answered with hare-brained flippancy, coupling her with the Queen of Sheba or some such far-away personage. Now Mrs. Flower was M—M was Muriel. And Diana was Muriel's sister.

"Well, well, Diana," he said cheerily, "that's that. All's going well, thank God. *Allons dîner!*"

He threw on hat and coat and opened the door for her to pass out. She looked over her shoulder with a smile.

"Now and then you show recognizable flashes of the human."

They drove the short distance to Fouquet's in the Avenue des Champs-Élysées and found a table against the wall and sat down side by side on the *banquette*. It was long since Buddy had dined with a pretty woman, amid cheerful surroundings. He resolved to make the most of his opportunity, bearing in mind, however, that he must not allow too many flashes of the human to develop into a blaze.



They put earnest heads together over the *carte du jour*. He noted that Diana was a young woman both of character and experience. She waved away the customary futile and thought-saving suggestions of the *maître d'hôtel*—*filets de sole, poulet en casserole*—and compelled him to the attitude of *maîtres d'hôtel* before the foreigner of gastronomic rank. Oysters—which would he recommend on that particular evening, Marennes or Belons? The Marennes.

"I'm glad," said Diana, in English, "the bottle-green will tone in so beautifully with my shade of red."

*Petite marmite*. Was it really good and strong? If not, she would send it away. Then. *Pâté de foie gras* of Strasbourg. Fresh? *En croûte*? It arrived that morning. "*Bon!*" said Diana. And, after that, *canard sauvage au sang*—done in their presence. *Salade de saison* not over-poisoned with vinegar.

"It may play the devil with your digeston, Atherton, but I'm thinking of your soul's good."

"And wine?" Buddy asked, holding the heavy wine list.

"That's your affair. Better stick to Burgundy. What do you say to a Meursault and a Richebourg?"

Buddy smiled amusedly. She left him the responsibility of choice, but chose all the same.

"That's over," she said, when the final orders had been given. "I'm sorry. It's a very pleasant part of dinner. I don't suppose you understand it, you're so prosaic. If you'd only live in your imagination a little more, Muriel would have a better time."

He repressed an impulse of impatience. He didn't want to talk of the unknown Muriel. But he must. He frowned and stared at his fingers that were playing with his bread.

"How do you think I fail in my—er—duty towards Muriel?"

"Don't you suppose Muriel really prefers a go-as-you-please friendly sort of place like this to the damned decorum of Ritzes and Carltons and Plazas?"

"She would only have to tell me what she wanted," said Buddy.

"But she won't. It's what you want all the time. If you had any imagination you'd see it for yourself."

"Knowing my unfortunate tastes," said Buddy, "why did you bring me here to-night?"

She laughed and squeezed lemon over the oysters which the waiter had just set down before her.

"Because you're not my little tin god, Atherton. I don't care a hang about your respectabilities and your prejudices. I know what I want and I'm in the habit of seeing that I get it."

"And when you marry?"

"It takes a very strong man to destroy a deep-seated habit in a woman."

"These are lovely oysters," said Buddy.

"Lovely. But isn't it rather unlike you to suggest—even in this delicate way—that we might talk of pleasanter things?"

He tried to assume a courtly, old-world manner.

"It has always been my hope that you and I should never discuss any but pleasant things."

She laughed with undisguised mockery.

"You must have suffered a lot, my poor man, from frustrated—what shall we call it?—aspirations."

Buddy shifted a bit sideways and leaned on the table, so that he could see her face in full, and, in so doing, met her clear dark eyes. They seemed to hold rebuke, challenge, laughing pity touched by scorn. Her lips were set in a humorous smile. He wished suddenly that she would take off her hat and disclose

her hair. The hat was baffling. The hair would complete the riddle of her. He felt sure that her way of wearing it would be full of character.

The waiter brought the silver soup tureen. The *maitre d'hôtel* served the soup and, after they had helped themselves to the grated cheese, waited for Madame's first experimental taste. He bowed at her smile of approval and went away a happy man. Buddy commented on the phenomenon.

"If people please me," said Diana, "they get what I've got to give."

"And if they don't please you?"

She shrugged her slim, rounded shoulders.

"You of all men ought to know."

Which retort was disconcerting. He went on with his soup in uncomfortable silence. Evidently the relations between this very much alive young woman and himself were, at the best, those of an armed neutrality. She suffered him—at times with a spurious gladness—for her sister's sake. Deep down within her she regarded him as the least considerable of God's creatures; that is, supposing for the sake of argument she believed in a God.

He finished his soup: excellent soup to which things feathered and horned had sacrificed their life essences. He had enjoyed it, in spite of his preoccupation. Then he turned on her.

"Why are you always down on me? All kinds of circumstances have been against me all my life—repressions, necessary ambitions, life impulses that have been strangled, God knows how. Do you suppose I didn't want to play cricket, row, dance, play the damfool when I was young? Do you suppose I really thanked God I was safe in a Government Office when other fellows were being killed in the War? Do you think I've enjoyed being a physical slacker all

my life?" He seized the bottle of old white Burgundy from the ice-pail, filled his glass and drank it off regardless of common courtesy—to Diana's great surprise. "Do you suppose I enjoy being a rotten dry stick of an invalid? Being repressed and repressed and repressed for six and thirty years? If I hadn't some red blood in my body how could what has happened between Muriel and me ever have happened? Damn it all, my dear child, I'm a male, not epicene."

He brought his hand down with a bang on the table. Diana regarded him with humorous amazement.

"Why on earth haven't you shown this cave-man side of you before?"

"Do you like it?" asked Buddy.

"I don't quite know," said Diana coldly.

He felt a tiny thrill of exultation. He had set her on a new track, at all events; tempted her to a reconsideration of judgment. Even had he not his own vigorous manhood instinctively to proclaim before this full-blooded, all too desirable woman, there must be insistent loyalty to the shadow he impersonated. Could Atherton, obviously the lover of this girl's sister, have supported during the last half-hour her implied scorn of his romantic potentialities with the meekness of the watery-veined, self-satisfied philosopher who knows anything save that which is happening under his nose? Impossible! Atherton would have quarrelled with her in his own rasping way.

They went on with dinner for some time in silence, broken only by casual references to the excellence of food or the peculiarities of fellow-guests in the restaurant. He had evidently given her something to think about. Presently he said:

"All this time you haven't told me about yourself. What have you been doing since we last met?"

"The same old thing. Running the shop more or less—chiefly less. Those altar candlesticks you couldn't make up your mind about, by the way, are sold."

"I really had no place in the flat to put them," said Buddy.

"I thought they were for Newstead."

A great idea flashed through Buddy's brain.

"I'm sick of the place," he said.

"Since when?"

"I never really liked it. It's dismal and damp. I shan't live there any more."

"I'm glad of that. I always thought it was a hole; but you seemed to like it."

"Repressions again," said Buddy. "I've been thinking about myself a lot lately—don't say that's nothing so unusual—I've been thinking in quite a different way. I've been living under a mask too long. I want to throw it off and be real."

"I certainly am having an interesting dinner," said Diana.

"You may laugh," said he with a shrug, "but it's true. What else have you been doing besides keeping shop?"

"Chiefly minding Muriel."

She said it with an air of resentment against him, as though the necessity for the minding of Muriel were his fault. The more he heard of Muriel the less attractive did she seem. Every one must come to her aid. Atherton must leave his affairs in London and run to Brighton or Paris or anywhere, at her call. He couldn't imagine Diana, mocking and efficient, requiring some one to mind her, even though she were suffering from the most appendicitical kind of appendicitis.

In his new character of Atherton in revolt, he raised

his glass of old Richebourg—he had just come to the end of his pink Strasbourg *pâté*—and said :

“ Although you don’t like me, Diana, you’re far and away the finest woman I know.” He bowed with an air—on his air alone Buddy had obtained many engagements in America. “ My devoted homage.”

She laughed outright at him.

“ My dear boy, if you are going to make love to me, I shan’t wait for the duck.”

He laughed too.

“ We’ll have the sacrifice first, anyway—*canard sauvage au sang*. Savage duck in its blood. Then we’ll consult the omens and see what happens.”

He filled their glasses. They drank. It was a very beautiful wine—Richebourg 1911—the imprisoned dreams of grapes on the golden slopes beneath the sun’s wooing of that glorious summer.

She turned, elbow on table, facing him.

“ Dining with you alone is a new experience to me. Do you always behave like this with young women you take out to dine alone ? ”

Buddy deliberately sipped his Burgundy.

“ Haven’t I told you I’ve been trying to put off the old Adam, who has always struck me as being a bit of an ass ? ”

The *maître d’hôtel* presented the roast duck so smug and trim externally, but stirred beneath the brown skin by the wild fierce juices of the unregenerate marsh. The table, altar of sacrifice, was wheeled in front of them. The moment was too solemn for frivolous talk. The delicately carved slices were laid in the dish. The carcass was hastily put in the silver press. The bird yielded its last drop through the spout. There was deft stirring by the *maître d’hôtel* while white-aproned acolytes stood by in anxious readiness. A flame, a perfume, a smile—and the delectable dish was served.

They grew more companionable. Diana ceased to twit him, and talked lightly of things with which he was supposed to be familiar. He remained as silent as tact and discretion allowed and learned many useful facts, the most important of which was that he had been involved for the last two years in a very serious intrigue with the wife of one Horatio Flower, an evil, hard-drinking, stag-hunting squire who in his intervals of leisure collected postage stamps and bred chimpanzees. He also threw plates and boots at Muriel's head until, fearing for her life, she had left him, and lived, *sur la branche*, as happily as she could. Buddy gathered that she had a comfortable fortune of her own, that her husband's place was just within the borders of the New Forest, that his grounds marched with those of Newstead Park, and that the visiting terms on which their acquaintance had been founded had gradually developed into terms more intimate. It was he who had advised the cutting of Muriel adrift from the impossible Horatio, and had since constituted himself her silent, discreet and most constant lover. And, at the present moment, Horatio was worrying her to death; writing her letters in which he now implored her to return to him, and now threatened her with idiot invocations of the law if she didn't.

"She believes he's having her watched," said Diana.

"What for?" asked Buddy.

"Grounds for divorce, you ostrich," said Diana.

"We've talked about it often enough."

"Oh, yes. Of course," said Buddy.

"It would be the best way out," she said. "Everybody knows what an impossible ass he is. No sensible creature would think the worse of the two of you. When you're married, Society, which both of you seem to regard as a mid-Victorian bishop's wife, would

open its arms to you and give you a hell of a good time."

She drained, with a little sizzling sound through the straw, the last drop of her *crème de menthe frappée*.

"Let's go. I've enjoyed myself tremendously. I never thought you could be such a perfect dear. Forgive me."

He laughed—thought out a pedantic twist of phrase :

"That I've won your approval at last, my dear Diana, is a very great comfort."

He slipped over her shoulders the furs that she had kept behind her on the *banquette*. The waiter came forward with the bill folded on a plate. The *chasseur* appeared with his hat and coat. He followed her out of the crowded restaurant conscious of eyes glancing at her admiringly on her passage, and manlike he sunned himself in the pride of her reflected glory.

A taxi took them to the hotel. While waiting for the lift, he said prudently :

"We'd better ring up the nursing-home together and save worrying them with two calls."

She accompanied him to his sitting-room. The call was put through. The answer came vaguely reassuring.

"I don't like it," she said, when the telephone interview was over. "She really hasn't got much stamina."

"If only she were like you," said Buddy, conscious of the superb strength of her youth, "I should be happier."

She laughed disdainfully, as she moved to the door. "I haven't wasted my substance in emotional living."

"You will, one of these days," he said, opening the door for her.

He accompanied her to the lift. They parted with valedictory waves of the hand. Darkness encom-



passed him as the smiling, mocking face beneath the red hat disappeared in the ascending lift.

He regained his sitting-room like a man in a dream and stood there helpless and stared about him.

If ever man felt himself floundering in mess, quagmire, bog, morass, quicksand, that man was Buddy Drake.

If there was one woman in the world to whose rescue, by all the laws of honour and decency, he was bound to struggle, it was Muriel Flower. If there was one woman in the world towards whom his heart leaped in appeal, it was Diana Merrow, her sister.

He floundered, with Fear grinning over his shoulder all night long.

