

## CHAPTER VI

**B**UDDY went out into a cheerless world ; a world of rawness and rain and leafless trees ; of streaming umbrellas, streaming vehicle tops, forlorn sodden posters on kiosks and pillars ; of the miserable morning gloom which lights in shop windows only make more miserable. It was not the Paris of his young memories or of his dreams in ramshackle Middle-West towns, wherein he had spent so much time during the past few dismal years. The only comfort to be gathered from the depressing streets was enclosed in the comfortable car which he had hired by the day. He was dry, he was warm, he sat soft. He could drive on for ever without thinking of wet boots, damp shoulders and rheumatically hands. If money could give him, besides this cat's comfort which he fully appreciated, a cat's cynically contented mind, he would be the happiest of God's creatures. But money seemed to have brought him a host of worries, which seriously disturbed the soul's peace to which, after a stormy life, he considered himself to be entitled.

He drove to the nursing-home in Auteuil, delivered a vast basket of Riviera roses with a card on which he had inscribed, "Dear love and best wishes," and made his inquiries. From the nurse's guarded answers he gathered that, though things were going on as well as could be expected, it was wise not to set expectations too high. Mrs. Flower had curiously little power of resistance. Her condition would probably

improve towards the afternoon. Perhaps Sir Atherton would ring up later.

Buddy, his duty done, entered the comfortable car, to which he was conducted across the wet pavements by the chauffeur, protecting umbrella in hand. His next destination? He didn't know. The hotel? The Tomb of Napoleon? It would have been a jolly day for the Morgue; but he remembered that it had been removed from its old, comfortable quarters behind Notre-Dame. Besides, he must put in at least a couple of hours before lunch. In desperation he told the driver to take him to the Louvre.

In the dreary December light the sculptured ladies and gentlemen on the ground floor seemed cold and uninspiring. Even the little Laughing Faun, remembered from youthful days and at once sought out, only seemed to be doing his best in adverse circumstances; an unconvincing Mark Tapley of a little faun. The warmth and glow of the picture galleries cheered him for a time. He stood before the Carlo Crivellis and their gold and their luscious fruits, and thought of Californian sunshine. He warmed himself before the del Sartos. The "Vierge aux Rochers" recalled to him the eyes of Diana Merrow. He was glad, however, that Diana's chin was not so pointed. He had never liked women with pointed chins. There was something malevolently witchlike about them. What the devil was the name of that woman in Denver? By the luck of the Lord he had escaped being made the world's colossal ass. Diana had a lovely rounded chin. He sauntered into the Medici Gallery. What kind of man could Rubens have been to conceive the ideal woman as fat, creamy flesh streaked with pink? He passed by, somewhat revolted. Thank Heaven he was a modern and saw woman not in terms of flesh absolute, but in terms of—he flicked impatient

fingers, seeking his formula—spiritual intellectual beauty? Well, not too damned beautiful. There must be a compensating ugliness in life, something of the grotesque, almost incongruous in a soul, like garlic in a stew, to make it human; and this must be mirrored in a face so as to save it from inane perfection. The saving flaw. That was it. There was an impertinent tilt in Diana's nose . . .

After this discovery he grew bored with pictures, gallery after gallery sparsely peopled, on that dismal morning, with the least inspiring of man- and woman-kind. It gave him a shock to see sporadic clots of Germans who moved about freely, red Baedekers in hand, sucking in and storing facts in their drab, earnest Teutonic way, just as though there had never been a War. He had accepted the existence of Germans in the United States. In the melting-pot of America there is no nationality too fantastic for acceptance. But in France. . . . There was a clot before the examples of Fragonard and Watteau, typically Prussian. An aggressive man in a rusty morning coat and a bowler hat, a cameo pin stuck in the knot of his tie which fell half an inch below his bone collar stud, obviously a professor of sorts, expounded the historical and structural significance of the butterfly paintings.

Buddy regarded the group for a few moments and then turned away, in a state of wonder at the mentality of a people which can enter a country where it is abhorred, in pursuit of a culture which it is impossible for it to understand.

He drove back to the hotel and held a telephone conversation with Diana, who had just returned from the nursing-home. From the fresh, pleasant tone in her voice he concluded he was in her good graces; a conclusion further confirmed by her suggestion they

should lunch in his sitting-room. In half an hour, said Diana.

By the time that she appeared, Buddy, delighted, had arranged the setting of things. In the small affairs of life he was a practical man and could act quickly. Her first startled glance of amusement, as it swept the room, rewarded him for pains-taking.

A cheerful wood fire blazed beneath the chimney-piece. On a small table stood bottles, glasses, cocktail shaker and a bowl of ice. By the side of one of the places on the table set for lunch, lay a great bunch—a bouquet—of violets, a position significantly in contrast with that of a vase of tawny chrysanthemums in the middle.

She laughed as she shook hands.

“My dear, is this home or heaven? I’ve never been so cold in my life. Ugh!” She crossed to the fire. “Oh, this is good. And that?” She pointed to the cocktail tray. “I’ll have to keep a diary. Atherton, day by day.”

He did his best to assume the Athertonian manner.

“I’m always distrustful of chance concoctions in an hotel. The ingredients are there. If you have any favourite recipe of your own——?”

“You want me to make the cocktails?”

“If you’ll honour me.”

“You’re the biggest fraud I know,” she laughed, as she went over to the little table. “Stuffed olives and little sticks. You won’t persuade me that a French *maitre d’hôtel* thought of that just by himself.”

“I won’t try,” said Buddy. “After all, I pride myself on observing the outer decencies of life.”

She busied herself for a moment or two in pouring liquids out of bottles. Then she said:

“ You did that this morning, at any rate. Muriel loved the flowers. She charged me with the usual messages.”

He made some sort of response, more occupied by the fascination of the girl's splendid assurance and the grace of her movements, as she rattled the silver shaker, than by the vague image of the pallid invalid. He stood by, watching her; handed her a napkin to mitigate the frostiness of the metal surface. He decided, even more than on the previous evening, that she was good to look upon. She had come down from her room without a hat. Her hair, black and wavy on her forehead, was short cropped and parted in the middle. In certain aspects she looked half boy, half Madonna; but, when she turned her deep mocking eyes on him, he knew that she was all woman; all that can be attractive, teasing, melting, stony and damnable in woman. With all this, however, he saw in her no concern. Here she was pouring out cocktails, in the most comrade-like way in the world. He knew instinctively that his presumed relations with Muriel were the sole sanctions in the girl's mind for this off-hand, almost family intimacy. What her moral attitude towards the liaison might be he had no idea. Most probably, he thought, she dismissed the ethical side of things with a modern shrug. Obviously she adored her sister, with a queer, protective kind of love. Last night she had been ever ready to bristle at him like a suspicious porcupine. On the other hand, no momentary protective instinct being aroused, she was, in the frankness of her heart, more than willing to accept him, in sisterly fashion, as a sort of illegitimate brother-in-law. He would have to walk very warily.

She sat, glass in hand, on a chair by the fire, one leg thrown over the arm.

"God! What a beast of a day! Poor Muriel in that fetid room!"

"Fetid?" Buddy queried.

She threw back her hanging leg to her knee.

"Oh, don't be so pedantic. You know exactly what I mean—filthy, loathsome, hideous, ghastly, chilly, bare, sanitary, eugenic, antiseptic, without the least little friendly, homely germ for her to pal up with. I'd like to see you there on the flat, of your back on a bed three feet wide and five feet from the ground, and the whole inside of you hurting like hell."

Buddy took up a position with back to fire.

"I know it's dreadful for our poor darling; but is there anything that can be done to make the dreadful place more comfortable for her?"

"Of course not, modern scientific treatment being what it is. Wives of emperors and multi-millionaires have to go through the same hygienic horrors as Muriel. But that doesn't alter my pity for Muriel lying there in that fetid, filthy, loathsome room. You have your own sense of the meaning of words. I have mine. Yours is literal and prosaic. Mine is imaginative and figurative. Mine's better than yours!" The waiter entered the room. "Thank God, there's lunch and we can end this idiot discussion."

They took their places at the table. She lifted the clump of violets. "For me?"

He bowed. "Of course."

She smiled her thanks and buried her face for a second in the flowers.

"What a lot of experience you must have had," she said.

"In what?"

"In the nice conduct of women."

"Instinct, my dear," said he, "sheer instinct."

It still rained drearily and the black gloom deepened over Paris. They ate by electric light, and after lunch sat by the cheerful blaze of the fire. For him restrained talk was difficult. He longed to tell her of the things with which his life had been concerned: athletics, the War, America—things of which Atherton had known nothing. On the other hand, he knew little or nothing of the scholarly and political pursuits that had been the main features of Atherton's career. He couldn't even talk intelligently on bodily ailments. Once more he must lead Diana to talk of herself, her history, her aims and ambitions, her pursuits. He felt happy when she took as her text her old furniture shop in Sloane Street. It was succeeding beyond her wildest hopes. She specialized in Renaissance Italian, small pieces to attract fastidious dwellers in small and expensive flats. It was a company, "Merro Ltd," of which she was chief shareholder and managing director. All her small fortune was involved. She considered that the suppression of the final "W" in her name was a stroke of genius. "Merro Ltd" gave the impression of Jewish solidity and cunning *flair* of the authentic. She told of the byways of Italian travel on which she picked up her little masterpieces. He learned, from her careless allusion, that she had embarked on this career of commercial virtuosity when one Guy Rickham had turned her down. Buddy grasped the fact that he was supposed to know all about Guy Rickham and his turpitude.

He nodded sagely.

"You were well rid of the fellow," he said.

"I was. I was young then and didn't know much. It hurt awfully for a time. When I found out later what a beast he was, I knew I'd had a narrow escape and praised God from whom all blessings flow."

"He was one of the rottenest brutes I've ever heard of," said Buddy.

A grateful glance showed her appreciation of the sincerity of his tone. And Buddy was sincere for the moment. A man who, with the gift of Diana in his hands, cast her off—base Indian that threw away a pearl—must be sunk to the neck in a *cloaca* of vileness. All the same, kindly soul though he was, he rejoiced in the thought of a fellow-creature irremediably fallen from grace. If Guy Rickham had been a tolerable human being, Diana would have married him, and would not be sitting there to-day with him before the fire, in this peculiar and delicious intimacy.

What had happened? He could not conjecture and dare not inquire. Had the said Guy Rickham, corrupt Acteon, intruded too violently on her Artemisian sanctities? His name suggested that of some man about town, from whom even modern mothers sought to shelter their daughters, and modern fathers, who are still old-fashioned, their sons.

"And what about the others?" he asked.

She sat stiff in her chair. "You know very well there have been no others."

He smiled. "How can a man know very well anything concerning women? Or vice versa?"

"Yes," she said, lighting a cigarette, "I suppose we shall be opposite numbers till the end of time, doing the same thing, each in our particular way, and never meeting."

After a while she rose. It was half-past three. She must go to the nursing-home. No, no; not the slightest use his accompanying her. He couldn't see Muriel. She would ring him up as soon as she got there and give him the afternoon's bulletin. Yes. She would use his car. He was a dear. A lovely



lunch and again thanks for the violets. She was dining and theatre-going with the Snow-Derwents and so wouldn't see him till the morrow. She repeated on parting from him, violets in hand :

"I'll tell Muriel again I never realized what a dear you are. It'll cheer her up."

Buddy returned from the lift-gate to his now stark and desolate sitting-room. Why had Fate declined to allow Diana, with her glow of face, voice, body and spirit, to remain there for ever? Fate loomed before him as the object of his peculiar dislike. He felt more lonely than ever.

A telephone call found his only acquaintance in Paris, Winslow Blaydes, his travelling companion of the day before. Was Mr. Blaydes free to dine with him that evening? Mr. Blaydes wasn't free, but he had a cheery bunch of American friends dining with him at Ciro's, and if Sir Atherton would honour him by going there—why, every one would be delighted.

Buddy accepted with joy, craving for companionship. He slept and read contentedly during the intervening hours. At the restaurant he met the bunch—folks of breeding and charm, and full of the joy of holiday life. In their genial company he forgot Atherton's austerity and reticence. They received him, who knew America in its length and breadth and infinite problems, as a man and a brother.

He went to bed at half-past three, conscious of many indiscretions, but very happy. For a few hours he had resumed his own personality—that of Buddy Drake, Soldier of Fortune, mummer, Bohemian, man of the world, Englishman of birth and breeding with manifold traditions behind him—the "real Buddy Drake—incontestably, if the worst came to the worst, Sir Brotherton Drake, Baronet, of old and respectable creation.

He had spent a delightful evening. Perhaps he had been indiscreet in crediting Atherton with his own experiences: The social world was small, and acquaintances of the Americans might well be acquaintances of Atherton, who, knowing that Atherton had never set foot in America, might cast suspicion on him as an impostor. He shrugged his shoulders. One or two risks run more or less couldn't make much difference. He was pleasantly sleepy. He got into bed and turned out the light. There were many good things in life ; one of the best a warm and comfortable bed.

On waking rather late in the morning the first thing he did was to ring up the nursing-home. He learned that Mrs. Flower had not passed a satisfactory night. She was still restless with a disconcerting temperature, and could receive no visitors that day except Miss Merrow. Of course his message would be conveyed to Mrs. Flower. Buddy put down the telephone with mixed feelings. He was genuinely sorry that the poor unknown lady should be suffering, and at the same time felt ashamedly relieved at the prospect of at least a day's respite. For the day must come for him to meet Muriel in the flesh and reduce to some kind of sense a fantastic situation.

He dressed, rang for breakfast and, after the meal, turned to the pile of correspondence that had been forwarded from London. This opening of letters was always a depressing affair. So many he could not answer, even on a typewriter with neuritis as an excuse. There had been one, a day or two ago, a model of damned cramped penmanship, eight pages of it, from a person at Oxford about another person called Apollonius of Tyana who aired futile views on the universe nearly two thousand years ago. It would have been meat and jam to Atherton. To

Buddy it was just hay and thistles. He had caught a phrase or two: "You must see my point . . ." and so on.

He typed out:

MY DEAR FRIEND,—

You are perfectly right.

Yours always

A. D.

This reply might have made Atherton turn in his grave, but it must have pleased the man at Oxford. But all letters were not so easily disposed of. He had brought a small suit-case full of them to Paris.

He sat resigned, pipe in mouth, before the sitting-room fire, the waste-paper-basket by his side for envelopes and circulars, and began his uninspiring task. The first three or four letters were of the usual type. Then he opened an envelope addressed in capital letters, a thin and miserable envelope, bearing an E.C.3 postmark. It contained a cheap piece of paper on which was written, also in capital letters, the following message:

You damned scoundrel. If you don't pay up before the first of January I'll make it hot for you.

X.

Buddy laughed as he threw aside the letter.

"The first flippant communication I've had," he said.

Fear, however, jogged him, almost jocularly, in the ribs. What did he know of Atherton? Of Atherton's responsibilities? Of his deviations into crooked paths? Blackmail obviously—to which Atherton would pay no attention. He flung the sordid sheet into the fire.

A few minutes later he took up a long blue envelope—thick, expensive paper—with the flap running its length.

His pipe dropped from his mouth as he read the curt contents.

A famous firm of solicitors had to inform him that Mr. Horatio Flower, of Langways Manor, Hampshire, was bringing an action for divorce against his wife, Mrs. Muriel Caroline Flower, and was citing him, Sir Atherton Drake, Bart, as co-respondent. They begged him to refer them to a firm of solicitors who would be authorized to accept service on his behalf.

Buddy picked up his pipe, knocked the ashes out against the hearth and polished the bowl against his sleeve.

What, in the name of God and Humanity, was he to do ?

He rang up Diana, on the point of going out. Would she see him for a moment on very serious business ?

She came down, bright and glowing, "in the red costume in which he had first seen her.

"What's all the seriousness about ?"

He handed her the letter. She read it and handed it back coolly.

"Well, you expected it, didn't you ?"

Buddy had to say :

"Of course."

"It's a good thing it has come at last. It'll ease everybody's mind and put things straight. In a few months you two can be married and can go everywhere."

"Yes, I suppose everywhere," said Buddy stupidly.

"Everywhere except the Royal Enclosure at Ascot."

"Where I've always been known as that prominent sporting baronet."

Diana laughed. "Cheer up. It won't be as socially

awful as you think. There will be no defence, so neither of you'll have to turn up. It'll make Muriel very happy. And it'll be a relief to my maiden modesty to get out of this corrupting atmosphere of sin. So bless you, my children."

She moved to the door and turned to him, a quick anxiety replacing the ironic laughter in her eyes. "I'm off to see her. She's none too well, poor darling."

"So they told me," said Buddy.

"I think we ought to have another opinion."

"I think so too," said Buddy.

"Well, come with me and see about it. You're responsible for her now, at any rate. Is your car downstairs?"

"Yes."

"Then let's get in it at once," said Diana.

