

CHAPTER VII

BUDDY spent a day of melancholy scarcely mitigated by a dinner and theatre with Diana. She was kind and sisterly, sometimes even motherly in her efforts to make him see the sunny side of divorce. Naturally a man of his academic and political distinction, of his reputation for fastidiousness and austerity, must shrink from the inevitable grin on the face of Society when the fact of his co-respondentship was published in the newspapers. Bishops, at first, would look at him askance, and men of the elderly buck type, which he particularly disliked, would dig him in the ribs with a revengeful chuckle and call him the modern equivalent of the sly dog of their youth. Diana sympathized with him in such afflictions. But she also brought consolation. A few months hence, when they were respectably married, who would worry about their dissolute past? In these days most people had enough worry of their own, wiring their own glass houses, without wasting time in futile stone throwing. Ostracism? Rot! Quite the contrary. They would be welcomed as an unexpectedly romantic pair. Romance dead? Never on your life, she declared. The more Society, proclaiming blatant materialism, tried to affirm its demise, the more did Society recognize it and sanction it even in its unsavoury classical guises. Well, that was cynical perhaps. Anyway, a pair of faithful lovers never lacked

popular sympathy and welcome. That might be platitudinous, but it was true. That was the suspicious thing about Truth to the highbrow mind. The more you tried to express it in brilliant paradoxes, the less like Truth did it become. The expression of Truth was so damned simple and ordinary.

This consoling presentation of affairs by a warm Diana might possibly have been grateful and comforting to Atherton, the lover of Muriel; but to Buddy, who had not as yet seen the lady, it was entirely lacking in appeal. All the time his mind was preoccupied^m by the problem. How, as a man who has ever shrunk from hurting his fellow-creatures, was he going to get out of the abominable situation?

He sat for a long time in front of the fire, before going to bed, cursing himself, as he had so often cursed himself during the past years. He was always cutting himself adrift, burning his boats, doing impulsive, idiotic, irremediable things.

This impersonation of Atherton was, after all, so unnecessary. Atherton dead, the title was his. As next of kin, he would have had access to Atherton's private papers. He would have found the will. He would have thrown it into the fire, and, Atherton having died intestate, he would have inherited.

But would he have thrown it into the fire? That would have been a cold-blooded, criminal act. And he wasn't a criminal, had never been a criminal, and never would be a criminal. No. In those hypothetical circumstances he would have never destroyed the will. Besides, he wouldn't have been such a brainless fool. The solicitors who had drawn it up would have behaved so odiously that the inevitable result of his applying for letters of administration would have been many years of penal servitude.

After all—he consoled himself by the thought—the

impulsive fool that he had been was a more intelligent being than the cold and stupid criminal. In assuming Atherton's personality he was only defrauding a non-existent Academy and a political organization that had no God-inspired reason for existence. Once more he argued his conscience clear.

But there was this poor, hapless lady. Surely the way of the innocent transgressor was unnecessarily hard.

A day or two afterwards she took a sudden turn for the better, and, on his perfunctory arrival at the nursing home, he was greeted by the matron who, smiling happily, told him he could present his flowers to the patient in person.

Dogged by cold Fear he followed the cold, clean nurse up the cold, clean stairs and was shown into a cold, clean room. On a cold, clean bed lay a thin-faced, pallid woman, with bleached fair hair showing dark at the roots and tired though lustrous dark eyes. And by the bedside sat Diana, swarthyly glowing and glorious.

He came forward. The woman in the bed smiled and stretched out a delicate hand. He took it, like a man in a dream, and bent his head and kissed it. She said, her eyes on his offering :

"More flowers? My dear, you're spoiling me terribly. Look round. I'm living in a garden. I don't think they've got another vase in the place."

He looked round and saw that the cold, clean room was ablaze with colour. Diana rose and took the flowers from his hand.

"They'll have to send out and buy some. I'll see about it." She turned at the door. "I'll come back in three minutes. Then your time will be up."

She went swiftly out. Buddy had already noted

one of her characteristics—a swift noiselessness of movement, a spirit of speed without flutter of garment or sound of footstep. It had been his first sensation of her in the hotel lounge the moment before he had seen her. Now she was gone before he could hold open the door.

His heart sank; the colour had faded from the flowers. Life seemed to have faded from the room.

“This is very idiotic of me,” said the sick woman who was Muriel, “but it isn’t my fault.”

“Fault? My poor child,” said Buddy, loathing himself for the inevitable imposture, “it’s any lurid adjective you like to call it. Anyhow, Guibault seems to have got to the bottom of the trouble. He explained it to me yesterday. You’re on the mend, on the up grade. In a week or so you will be dancing.”

“Dancing?” There was a query in her eyes. “What an odd thing for you to say, dear.”

He sat down on the chair vacated by Diana.

“Why?”

“Well, you’ve always hated my dancing, because you could never dance with me.”

Buddy reflected. Yes. Atherton and his heart; prim, austere even in his emotional outlook.

“I’ve been thinking a lot the last few days,” he said. “I’ve had a lot to think about, as you know. And I’ve come to the conclusion that I’ve been rather selfish, putting my rotten health and my position and what-not too much, as it were, in the foreground.”

She smiled wanly. “Diana has been telling me something about it.”

She paused for a long time, looking him deep in the eyes.

“You’ll stick to me, Atherton, won’t you?”

He said earnestly:

"You may be sure I'll do my very best for you, Muriel."

He was sincere. He would do his best. But what that best might be he could not, for the moment, imagine.

She sighed contentedly. "Of course. I knew it. But it's nice to hear you say so. I've been having such a bad time. You know. A threatening of pneumonia. I'm better, they say."

He tried to be cheerful. "You'll be up and about very soon, now. Have you made any plans—where to go after you leave here?"

"No," she replied helplessly. "Have you?"

Buddy felt equally helpless. What kind of plans could he make that could embrace the two of them?

"You at any rate, my dear," he said, "must clear out of this; go south—get warm in the sunshine. The north is no place for sick folks. I shall be much better away from England myself. Diana has told you about Newstead? Well, that's the first step."

"The next is to travel round a bit, until we find the right spot?"

He answered her smile. "Yes, that's about it."

But in his heart there was blank dismay. She took it for granted that they should seek the spot together; set out, as soon as things practical allowed them. At all events, it was urgent for him to attune his mind to an indeterminate gap between now and the start of their joint travels. The main and immediate consideration, he said, was complete restoration to health. Cannes, Mentone, Bordighera—as soon as she could be moved. He himself must stay behind for a while to settle up affairs. She acquiesced unmutmuringly. Yes. Dolly Valentine was in Mentone; would put her up at the villa at any time.

"Splendid!" said Buddy. "For the present, let it go at that."

Diana came in, and again the room glowed. She set two vases triumphantly on a table.

"Of course the silly liars had them. They were reserving them for a little lady who is daily smothered in orchids by a Peruvian prince. I gave them hell." She leaned over the bed. "Feeling better, now you've seen him?"

Muriel smiled up into the girl's face, and there was a happiness in her eyes that made Buddy wince. Diana nodded across the bed to him.

"That's enough for to-day. Nurse's orders. She's waiting outside."

Buddy went through a leave-taking tenderly formal or formally tender; possibly—as he thought afterwards—such as she expected from Atherton. He took her hand, bent down, kissed her cheek and promised a longer visit on the morrow.

He drove back from Auteuil sick at heart, dreadfully troubled in mind. What the devil was he to do? From his quandary there was no issue that did not lead to destruction.

He spent the rest of the day in examination of such issues.

The obvious one was cynical acceptance of the situation. He had already, long ago, stolen a woman from his brother. This was but an ironical self-repetition of history. His soul revolted. The cases were on different planes of emotional, spiritual and physical fact. To run away with a brother's virginal betrothed—no matter how great the wrong done—was a human, clean, passionate act justified by great mutual love. To supplant by fraud the same brother, now dead, in the arms of a trusting woman, a mistress who, sacrificing all, counted on becoming wife, was both an abomination of the flesh and the spirit.

He would not even have the miserable sanction of a great physical temptation. Poignantly though he pitied her, she was the last woman in the world by whom he could be attracted. He judged her to be negative, helpless, dependent, the ineffectual though charming woman who follows the line of least resistance. He didn't like her bleached hair. It was symbolic. Simulation of a lover's ardour would be a nightmare of cold horror.

Another issue. Could he go through with it, the months of waiting, the marriage, in the guise of an Atherton so decrepit in health, his life hanging on so tenuous a thread, that all he could give her would be his mere name and the protection of his roof? He thumped his sound body and regarded his hard-bitten face, from which traces of recent privation had already faded. A loving woman's anxiety would have him examined by all the heart and other specialists in Europe, who could not do otherwise than pronounce him as fit and tough as when he marched into his first trench in Flanders, years ago.

No. That issue would land him in the bog of absurdity.

He could run away now, pack up his things, take train to some port and sail away to South America, South Africa, Madagascar, his whereabouts known to none but his bankers.

It was the way out of a mean thief, a sneaking crook. God! He could never speak to himself, look himself in the face again. The divorce, an undefended case, would go through, decree *nisi* made absolute after six months, and the poor, defenceless lady would be left there, stranded, *plantée là*, heart-broken, life-broken. And Diana would be on her side, breathing against him a venom of righteous invective that would reach him through illimitable space in no

matter what obscure cranny of the world he might choose to hide his despicable self.

Confession? Surrender? Perhaps the bravest sally of all from the beleaguered quandary.

"I've got to do it!" he cried exultantly aloud.

Then, common sense blotting out Fear stared him in the face.

"How the hell can I?"

Confession to the world at large would be a great gesture of which he did not feel himself capable. It would mean penal servitude. Until he began to consider this issue he had not realized what an arch-criminal he would be in the eyes of the law. He was guilty of dreadful crimes: wrongful impersonation; false registry of death; destruction of a will; fraudulent usurpation of an estate. He didn't know the legal names of all these offences, but of their heinousness he was startlingly aware. No; confession would do nobody any good.

He might go to her privately and throw himself on her mercy. If she kept his secret, the divorce would go through. They would part friends, and she would be free to marry any other man she chose. But what if she either deliberately or through flabbiness of temperament betrayed his secret? It would be too romantic a piece of gossip for any outsider to keep to himself. The news of his usurpation would be all over London in a few days. It would be hinted at in the newspapers. The police would take a hand, and his uncomfortable destination would be Dartmoor.

Of course he could buy a revolver and blow out his silly brains. That would be a complete solution. It seemed to be the only one. But, no matter how shrewishly it had treated him, Buddy had always been in love with life. He could not bring himself to

kill the thing he loved. It was out of the question. But what on earth was he to do?

The only honourable course was throwing himself on her mercy. But when?

Diana burst in upon him as he sat in this welter of indecision.

"I've just rung up," she said, "and she has started another temperature. It's too bad. The matron puts it down to the excitement over your visit."

"I'm sorry," he said, "I tried to be as restful as I could."

"Perhaps that's it," said Diana, accepting a light for a cigarette. "When I left she was worrying whether you really loved her."

"I think I've given her proofs," said Buddy.

She made a little gesture with the hand holding the cigarette and looked into the fire.

"I suppose you have. And I suppose she has given you proofs too. But you've always been the tamest lovers I've come across. You know—or ought to know perfectly well—your joint romance, to give it a name, has always beaten me. When she married Horatio I was glad. He seemed to be the very man for her. He——"

Buddy interrupted:

"Even when he ill-treated her?"

"She must have asked for it. Anyhow, that's not my business. He was mad over her. Then you came along. At first I thought it was a passion in a teacup."

Buddy rose and stood over her frowningly.

"And what did you think it was afterwards?"

She answered him with a hard look in her eyes:

"I shouldn't like to say."

"Well, don't. I'm fond of you, Diana, far fonder than you are of me. But if you say insulting things about me, I'll throw you out."

She pitched her cigarette into the fire, and rose and gaped at him.

"Throw me out?"

"Yes."

For all his impersonation of Atherton, he was damned if he was going to be treated like a worm by any woman alive. He forgot their fictitious relations. Suddenly he remembered. Laughter shook him. He planted both hands on her shoulders.

"Sit down, my dear. You don't know everything. What you want out of life and what Muriel wants out of life are two entirely different things."

She sat obediently, but met his eyes in dark challenge.

"Why drag me into it?"

"You've dragged yourself into it. Every woman's temperament, or whatever you like to call it, is her own standard."

"It doesn't take much temperament to put a foot in a bath and find out if it's hot or tepid."

"I don't see how you could possibly have put your foot in our bath," he countered jestingly. "Besides, argument by false analogy doesn't lead us anywhere."

"There are times when I hate you," said Diana.

"Especially during the last few days."

She flashed a glance at him. "What made you say that?"

"You'd better think it out for yourself, my dear. Anyhow," he continued after a pause, "it's much better for a man's self-respect for him to feel himself actively hated than treated with a sort of passive contempt."

She glanced at the clock, and rose again.

"I must go and dress. I'm dining out. I don't know what's come over you of late. You're quite different. I've tried so hard to be your friend."

"I hope," said Buddy, with a little flourish, taking

her hand in both of his, "that you'll find it easier every day."

As soon as she had gone, he realized that his delectable passage at arms had not been over-prudent. Atherton, having to set the girl in her place, would have adopted an entirely different method of combat. Impervious to her attack, he would have been dryly, donnishly, witheringly sarcastic. He doubted whether she would have attacked the real Atherton at all. He, Buddy, she said, was so different.

Buddy dined and went to a revue by himself and, although feeling lonely, passed a tolerable evening.

The next day was marked by various happenings. First came a letter from Edgar Fry, urging him to return to London in order to discuss both the divorce proceedings and a tentative offer for the purchase of Newstead Park.

Then he learned on presenting grapes at the nursing-home that Mrs. Flower was not well enough to receive him. He must wait for two or three days, when they hoped she would be really strong again. Oh, there was no danger now—the matron smiled—but any little excitement would retard her recovery.

He went away almost light-hearted. He had been spared this dreaded ordeal of a second interview with the unfortunate lady. If he obeyed Fry's summons, a further meeting, by some tactful means or the other, might be indefinitely postponed. This would give him time to think—to seek or devise some honourable issue out of his quandary. For there must be one, as yet unrecognized, but still staring him in the face. He would gain a spell of comparative ease, at any rate. A care-free week was a gift of the gods in a harried life. It wasn't as if Muriel were in serious danger. Recovery was certain. His absence from her was

better than his company. He could go with a conscience clean, unsullied by unkindly act. Things were beginning to straighten themselves out already. Buddy was an inveterate optimist.

It was a bright, clear morning. The sun shone mildly now and then—out of patches of pale-blue sky. Paris smiled on him and he smiled on Paris. He felt healthily hungry. Where was that place he used to go to years ago—the old-fashioned restaurant with the world-famous cellar of wine? Voisin! He gave the order to the chauffeur.

There it was still, in its little street in the heart of Paris. How well he remembered it! He dismissed the car. He would walk home. The miserable weather of the past few days had deprived him of necessary exercise. Not only was exercise good for his own liver, but it was essential to the avoidance of un-Athertonian flesh.

He lunched well. The place was just as shabby and cosy as ever. The *sommelier* seemed to have mellowed in his own cellar. Buddy was happy. He had a definite thing to do. Over a cigar and old brandy he planned the doing of it. He must leave that day for London—by any old night boat—via Havre, for instance. He might wire to Bronson. He had a guileful inspiration. He would add to the telegram, "On no account must anyone know that I'm back in town." That for one thing would queer an ever-solicitous Selous. Buddy dreaded Selous and his stethoscope and tapping fingers and affectionately searching questions. While in London he had developed escape from Selous into a fine art. Besides, all kinds of unknown acquaintances believed him to be in Paris. Let them still be happy in their illusion.

It was necessary to see his solicitors about the

divorce. He had a vague idea of legal procedure, but assumed that some sort of legal paper would be stuck into his hand. Muriel, he supposed, had her own solicitors. He must speak to Diana about it before his departure.

Then there was Newstead Park and a prospective purchaser. For the first time he realized that a man couldn't sell a country-house full of intimate belongings—books, pictures, documents—with the same carelessness one would sell a motor-car. Furniture, books, pictures—they mattered very little; but the thought of documents hit him like a sudden blow on the head. Of course he must go there and examine locked drawers and cupboards. In the latter there might be God knows what skeletons. In the former, any kind of compromising papers. The Atherton of public and the Atherton of private life were two very different people. Buddy recalled the dirty, anonymous letter that he had thrown into the fire. There had been Cora Blenkinsop. In a far higher category, to be sure, there was Muriel. Prudence, common sense compelled him to Newstead. Otherwise he might just as well add to the House and Estate Agents' advertisement of "Fine old country-house standing in its own grounds, etc., etc.," the inducement, "Unopened Bluebeard's Chamber thrown in."

Beyond doubt his own self-interest made a visit to Newstead imperative. He had a busy time before him. But Buddy always felt happy when inexorable Destiny set his feet on a particular road. After all, it was Destiny's responsibility—Fate's funeral—not his.

Now and again, indeed, in the far distance, he had heard the awful susurration of the wings of driving Furies. But it had died away. Perhaps he had unconsciously turned towards them with his wistful smile

and they had veered off from the pursuit of a not very interesting non-evil doer.

Buddy paid his bill and walked out into the pale sunshine and keen December wind. It was good to be alone ; to have money in his pocket again ; good, with that same money, to be once more in Paris treading with springing step the pavements that symbolized the Paris of his youth. He wandered haphazard, and, after a while, found himself walking eastward along the Grands Boulevards. In the Champs-Élysées he was lost. It was a new and confusing Paris. But now here was the Boulevard Montmartre—changed of course—in a way more drab, in another, more startling with new buildings—but, anyhow, the Boulevard with the tang of old associations still lingering around its kiosks and gaily coloured columns and its trees and its daintily stepping, hurrying girls, and serious men with great rolls of paper or leather pouches under their arms. And there was the same old smell—a smell defying description, the smell of Paris. Perhaps, he mused as he walked, that is the secret of the fascination of Paris. It has an odour of its own, no matter if you stand in the Place de la Bastille or under the Arc de Triomphe. No other capital has its own particular perfume. Not London, nor New York. Chicago, perhaps, when the wind blows from the packing sheds. Buddy shuddered at the whiff of memory. But he soon spat it from his mind. He was in Paris, enjoying the very essence and spirit of what, in some obfuscated yet imaginative way, he conceived to be Paris.

And then suddenly another thing happened.

An outcast man was selling little monkeys on the pavement ; clockwork monkeys that, wound up, scratched themselves, brought up the harvest in both slender hands, blinked their eyes and nibbled in realistic appearance.

Buddy paused for a moment, amused. The man pushed a new monkey from his box.

"Cinq francs, Monsieur."

The vendor was an undersized little man with a bush of white hair under an old hard felt hat.

"Cinq francs, Monsieur."

Their eyes met.

"Dio! Buddy—Buddy Drake!"

"Tonio! Good God!" cried Buddy.

