CLASSICS TO GO

THE PHILANDERERS

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PROLOGUE

Five Englishmen were watching a camp fire in the centre of a forest clearing in mid-Africa. They did not speak, but sat propped against logs, smoking. One of the five knocked out the ashes of his pipe upon the ground; a second, roused by the movement, picked up a fresh billet of wood with a shiver and threw it on to the fire, and the light for a moment flung a steady glow upon faces which were set with anxiety. The man who had picked up the billet looked from one to the other of the faces, then he turned and gazed behind him into the darkness. The floor of the clearing was dotted with the embers of dying fires, but now and again he would hear the crackle of a branch and see a little flame spirt up and shine upon the barrels of rifles and the black bodies of the sleeping troops. Round the edge of the clearing the trees rose massed and dark like a cliff's face. He turned his head upwards.

'Look, Drake!' he cried suddenly, and pointed an arm eastwards. The man opposite to him took his pipe from his mouth and looked in that direction. The purple was fading out of the sky, leaving it livid.

'I see,' said Drake shortly, and, replacing his pipe, he rose to his feet. His four companions looked quickly at each other and the eldest of them spoke.

'Look here, Drake,' said he, 'I have been thinking about this business all night, and the more I think of it the less I like it. Of course, we only did what we were bound to do. We couldn't get behind that evidence; there was no choice for us; but you're the captain, and there is a choice for you.'

'No,' replied Drake quietly. 'I too have been thinking about it all night, and there is no choice for me.'

'But you can delay the execution until we get back.'

'I can't even do that. A week ago there was a village here.'

'It's not the man I am thinking of. I haven't lived my years in Africa to have any feeling left for scum like that. But also I haven't lived my years in Africa without coming to know there's one thing above all others necessary for the white man to do, and that's to keep up the prestige of the white man. String Gorley up if you like, but not here—not before these blacks.'

'But that's just what I am going to do,' answered Drake, 'and just for your reason, too—the prestige of the white man. Every day something is stolen by these fellows, a rifle, a bayonet, rations—something. When I find the theft out I have to punish it, haven't I? Well, how can I punish the black when he thieves, and let the white man off when he thieves and murders? If I did—well, I don't think I could strike a harder blow at the white man's prestige.'

'I don't ask you to let him off. Only take him back to the coast. Let him be hanged there privately.'

'And how many of these blacks would believe that he had been hanged?' Drake turned away from the group and walked towards a hut which stood some fifty yards from the camp fire. Three sentries were guarding the door. Drake pushed the door open, entered, and closed it behind him. The hut was pitch dark since a board had been nailed across the only opening.

'Gorley!' he said.

There was a rustling of boughs against the opposite wall, and a voice answered from close to the ground.

'Damn you, what do you want?'

'Have you anything you wish to say?'

'That depends,' replied Gorley after a short pause, and his voice changed to an accent of cunning.

'There's no bargain to be made.'

The words were spoken with a sharp precision, and again there was a rustling of leaves as though Gorley had fallen back upon his bed of branches.

'But you can undo some of the harm,' continued Drake, and at that Gorley laughed. Drake stopped on the instant, and for a while there was silence between the pair. A gray beam of light shot through a chink between the logs, and then another and another until the darkness of the hut changed to a vaporous twilight. Then of a sudden the notes of a bugle sounded the reveillé. Gorley raised himself upon

his elbows and thrust forward his head. Outside he heard the rattle of arms, the chatter of voices, all the hum of a camp astir.

'Drake,' he whispered across to the figure standing against the door, 'there's enough gold dust to make two men rich, but you shall have it all if you let me go. You can—easily enough. It wouldn't be difficult for a man to slip away into the forest on the march back if you gave the nod to the sentries guarding him. All I ask for is a rifle and a belt of cartridges. I'd shift for myself then.'

He ended abruptly and crouched, listening to the orders shouted to the troops outside. The men were being ranged in their companies. Then the companies in succession were marched, halted, wheeled, and halted again. Gorley traced a plan of their evolutions with his fingers upon the floor of the hut. The companies were formed into a square.

'Drake,' he began again, and he crawled a little way across the hut; 'Drake, do you hear what I'm saying? There's a fortune for you, mind you, all of it; and I am the only one who can tell you where it is. I didn't trust those black fellows —no, no,' and he wagged his head with an attempt at an insinuating laugh. 'I had it all gathered together, and I buried it myself at night. You gave me a chance before with nothing to gain. Give me another; you have everything to gain this time. Drake, why don't you speak?'

'Because there's no bargain to be made between you and me,' replied Drake. 'If you tell me where the gold dust's hid, it will be given back to the people it belonged to, or rather

to those of them you left alive. You can do some good that way by telling me, but you won't save your life.'

Steps were heard to approach the hut; there was a rap on the door.

'Well?' asked Drake.

Gorley raised himself from the floor.

'I am not making you rich and letting you kill me too,' he said; and then, 'Who cares? I'm ready.'

Drake opened the door and stepped out. Gorley swaggered after him. He stood for a moment on the threshold. Here and there a wisp of fog ringed a tree-trunk or smoked upon the ground. But for the rest, the clearing, littered with the charred debris of a native village, lay bare and desolate in a cold morning light.

'It looks a bit untidy,' said Gorley, with a laugh. Two of the troopers approached and laid their hands upon his shoulders. At first he made a movement to shake them off. Then he checked the impulse and stood quietly while they pinioned him. After they had finished he spat on the ground, cast a glance at the square and the rope dangling from a branch above it, and walked easily towards it. The square opened to receive him and closed up again.

On the march back two of the Englishmen sickened of ague and died. Six months later a third was killed in a

punitive expedition. The fourth was drowned off Walfisch Bay before another year had elapsed.

CHAPTER I

Hugh Fielding, while speculating upon certain obscure episodes in the history of a life otherwise familiar to an applauding public, and at a loss to understand them, caught eagerly at a simile. Now Fielding came second to none in his scorn for the simile as an explanation, possibly because he was so well acquainted with its convenience. 'A fairy lamp' he would describe it, quite conscious of the irony in his method of description, 'effective as an ornament upon a table-cloth, but a poor light to eat your dinner by.'

Nevertheless Fielding hugged this particular simile, applying it as a sort of skeleton key to the problem of Stephen Drake's career.

He compared Drake's career, or at all events that portion of it which was closed, to the writing of a book. So many years represent the accumulation of material, a deliberate accumulation; at a certain date the book is begun with a settled design, *finis* being clearly foreseen from the first word of the preface. But once fairly started the book throws the writer on one side and takes the lead, drags him, panting and protesting, after it, flings him down by-ways out of sight of his main road, tumbles him into people he had no thought of meeting, and finally stops him dead, Heaven knows where—in front of a blank wall, most likely, at the

end of a *cul de sac*. He may sit down then and cry if he likes, but to that point he has come in spite of his intentions.

The actual settling down to the work, with the material duly ticketed at his elbow, in Drake's case Hugh Fielding dated back to a certain day towards the close of October.

Upon that afternoon the *Dunrobin Castle* from Cape Town steamed into Plymouth Harbour, and amongst the passengers one man stepped from the tender on to the quay and stood there absolutely alone. No one had gone out to the ship to meet him; no one came forward now on the quay-side, and it was evident from his indifference to the bystanders that he expected no one. The more careless of these would have accounted him a complete stranger to the locality, the more observant an absentee who had just returned, for while his looks expressed isolation, one significant gesture proved familiarity with the environments. As his eyes travelled up the tiers of houses and glanced along towards the Hoe, they paused now and again and rested upon any prominent object as though upon a remembered landmark, and each such recognition he emphasised with a nod of the head.

He turned his back towards the town, directing his glance in a circle. The afternoon, although toning to dusk, was kept bright by the scouring of a keen wind, and he noted the guard-ship on his right at its old moorings, the funnels rising like solid yellow columns from within a stockade of masts; thence he looked across the water to the yellowing woods of Mount Edgcumbe, watched for a moment or so the brown

sails of the fishing-smacks dancing a *chassez-croisez* in the Sound, and turned back to face the hill-side. A fellow-passenger, hustled past him by half a dozen importunate children, extricated a hand to wave, and shouted a cheery 'See you in town, Drake.' Drake roused himself with a start and took a step in the same direction; he was confronted by a man in a Norfolk jacket and tweed knickerbockers, who, standing by, had caught the name.

'Captain Stephen Drake?'

'Yes. Why?'

The man mopped a perspiring face.

'I was afraid I had missed you. I should have gone out on the tender, only I was late. Can you spare me a moment? You have time.'

'Certainly,' answered Drake, with a look of inquiry.

The man in the knickerbockers led the way along the quay until he came to an angle between an unused derrick and a wall.

'We shall not be disturbed here,' he said, and he drew an oblong note-book and a cedar-wood pencil from his pocket.

'I begin to understand,' said Drake, with a laugh.

'You can have no objection?'

There was the suavity of the dentist who holds the forceps behind his back in the tone of the speaker's voice.

'On the contrary, a little notoriety will be helpful to me too.'

That word 'too' jarred on the reporter, suggesting a flippancy which he felt to be entirely out of place. The feeling, however, was quickly swallowed up in the satisfaction which he experienced at obtaining so easily a result which had threatened the need of diplomacy.

'*O si sic omnes!*' he exclaimed, and made a note of the quotation upon the top of the open leaf.

'Surely the quotation is rather hackneyed to begin with?' suggested Drake with a perfectly serious inquisitiveness. The reporter looked at him suspiciously.

'We have to consider our readers,' he replied with some asperity.

'By the way, what paper do you represent?'

The reporter hesitated a little.

'The *Evening Meteor*,' he admitted reluctantly, keeping a watchful eye upon his questioner. He saw the lips join in a hard line, and began to wonder whether, after all, the need for diplomacy had passed.

'I begin to appreciate the meaning of journalistic enterprise,' said Drake. 'Your editor makes a violent attack

upon me, and then sends a member of his staff to interview me the moment I set foot in England.'

'You hardly take the correct view, if I may say so. Our chief when he made the attacks acted under a sense of responsibility, and he thought it only fair that you should have the earliest possible opportunity of making your defence.'

'I beg your pardon,' replied Drake gravely. 'Your chief is the most considerate of men, and I trust that his equity will leave him a margin of profit, only I don't seem to feel that I need make any defence. I have no objection to be interviewed, as I told you, but you must make it clear that I intend nothing in the way of apology. Is that understood?'

The pressman agreed, and made a note of the proviso.

'There is another point. I have seen nothing of the paper necessarily for the last few weeks. The *Meteor* has, I suppose, continued its—crusade, shall we call it?—but on what lines exactly I am, of course, ignorant. It will be better, consequently, that you should put questions and I answer them, upon this condition, however,—that all reference is omitted to any point on which I am unwilling to speak.'

The reporter demurred, but, seeing that Drake was obdurate, he was compelled to give way.

'The entire responsibility of the expedition rests with me,' Drake explained, 'but there were others concerned in it. You might trench upon private matters which only affect them.'

He watched the questions with the vigilance of a counsel on behalf of a client undergoing cross-examination, but they were directed solely to the elucidation of the disputed point whether Drake had or had not, while a captain in the service of the Matanga Republic, attacked a settlement of Arab slave-dealers within the zone of a British Protectorate. The editor of the *Meteor* believed that he had, and strenuously believed it—in the interests of his shareholders. Drake, on the other hand, and the Colonial Office, it should be added, were dispassionately indifferent to the question, for the very precise reason that they knew it could never be decided. There were doubts as to the exact sphere of British influence, and the doubts favoured Drake for the most part. Insular prehensiveness, at its highest flight, could do no more than claim Boruwimi as its uttermost limit, and was aware it would be hard put to it to substantiate the claim. The editor, nevertheless, persevered, bombarded its citizen readers with warnings about trade fleeing from lethargic empires, published a cartoon, and reluctantly took the blackest view of Drake's character and aims.

Drake's march with a handful of men six hundred miles through a tangled forest had been a handsome exploit, quickening British pride with the spectacle of an Englishman at the head of it. Civilian blood tingled in office and shop, claiming affinity with Drake's. It needed an Englishman to bill-hook a path through that fretwork of branches, and fall upon his enemy six weeks before he was expected—the true combination of daring and endurance that stamps the race current coin across the world! Economy also pleaded for Drake. But for him the country itself must have burned out

the hornets' nest, and the tax-payer paid, and paid dearly. For there would have been talk of the expedition beforehand, the force would have found an enemy prepared and fortified. The hornets could sting too! Whereas Drake had burned them out before they had time to buzz. He need not have said one word in exculpation of himself, and that indeed he knew. But he had interests and ambitions of his own to serve; a hint of them peeped out.

'As to your future plans?' asked the reporter. 'You mean to go back,
I presume.'

'No; London for me, if I can find a corner in it. I hold concessions in Matanga.'

'The land needs development, of course.'

'Machinery too; capital most of all.'

At the bookstall upon the platform Drake bought a copy of the *Times*, and whilst taking his change he was attracted by a grayish-green volume prominently displayed upon the white newspapers. The sobriety of the binding caught his fancy. He picked it up, and read the gold-lettered title on the back—*A Man of Influence*. The stall-keeper recommended the novel; he had read it himself; besides, it was having a sale. Drake turned to the title-page and glanced at the author's name—Sidney Mallinson. He flashed into enthusiasm.

'Selling, eh?'

'Very well indeed.'

'Has it been published long?'

'Less than three months.'

'I will take it, and everything else by the same author.'

'It is his first book.'

The stall-keeper glanced at his enthusiastic customer, and saw a sunburnt face, eager as a boy's.

'Oh!' he said doubtfully, 'I don't know whether you will like it. It's violently modern. Perhaps this,' and he suggested with an outstretched forefinger a crimson volume explained by its ornamentation of a couple of assegais bound together with a necklace of teeth. Drake laughed at the application of the homoeopathic principle to the sale of books.

'No, I will take this,' he said, and, moving aside from the stall, stood for a little turning the book over and over in his hands, feeling its weight and looking incessantly at the title-page, wondering, you would say, that the author had accomplished so much.

He had grounds for wonder, too. His thoughts went back across the last ten years, and he remembered Mallinson's clamouring for a reputation; a name—that had been the essential thing, no matter what the career in which it was to be won. Work he had classified according to the opportunities it afforded of public recognition; and his classification varied from day to day. A *cause célèbre* would

suggest the Bar, a published sermon the Church, a flaming poster persuade to the stage. In a word, he had looked upon a profession as no more than a sounding-board.

It had always seemed to Drake that this fervid desire for fame, as a thing apart in itself, not as a symbol of success won in a cherished pursuit, argued some quality of weakness in the man, something unstable which would make for failure. His surprise was increased by an inability to recollect that Mallinson had ever considered literature as a means to his end. Long sojourning in the wilderness, moreover, had given Drake an exaggerated reverence for the printed page. He was inclined to set Mallinson on a pinnacle, and scourge himself at the foot of it for his earlier distrust of him. He opened the book again at the beginning, and let the pages slip across beneath his thumb from cover to cover; 413 was marked on the top corner of the last; 413 pages actually written and printed and published; all consecutive too; something new on each page. He turned to a porter.

'How long have I before the train starts?'

'Five minutes, sir.'

'Where is the telegraph office?'

The office was pointed out to him, and he telegraphed to Mallinson at the address of his publishers. 'Have just reached England. Dine with me at eight to-morrow at the Grand Hotel'; and he added after a moment's pause, 'Bring Conway, if you have not lost sight of him.—DRAKE.'

When the train started Drake settled himself to the study of *A Man of Influence*. The commentary of the salesman had prepared him for some measure of perplexity. There would be hinted references and suggestions, difficult of comprehension to the traveller out of touch with modern developments. These, however, would only be the ornaments, but the flesh and blood of the story would be perceptible enough. It was just, however, this very flesh and blood which eluded him; he could not fix it in a definite form. He did not hold the key to the author's intention.

Drake's *vis-à-vis* in the carriage saw him produce the book with considerable surprise, conscious of an incongruity between the reader and what he read. His surprise changed to amusement as he noticed Drake's face betray his perplexity and observed him turn now and again to the title upon the cover as though doubtful whether he had not misread it. He gave an audible chuckle.

Drake looked up and across the carriage at a man of about fifty years of age with a large red face and a close-cropped pointed beard. The chuckle swelled to a laugh.

'You find that a hard nut to crack?' Drake noticed a thickness in the articulation.

'I have been some years abroad. I hardly catch its drift,' explained
Drake, and then with an effort at praise:

'It seems a clever satire.'

'Satire!' guffawed the other. 'Well, that's rich! Satire? Why, it's a manifesto. Gad, sir, it's a creed. I believe in my duty to my senses and the effectuation of me for ever and ever, Amen. The modern jargon! Topsy Turvydom! Run the world on the comic opera principle, but be flaming serious about it. Satire, good Lord!'

He flung himself back on his cushions with a snort of contempt.

'Look you, I'm not a pess—' he checked at the word and then took it at a run, 'a pessimist, but, as things are going on—well, you have been out of the country and—and you can't help it, I suppose. You may laugh! P'raps you haven't got daughters—not that I have either, praise glory! But nieces, if the father's a fool, wear you out very little less. Satire, ho! ho!'

The semi-intoxicated uncle of nieces relapsed vindictively into his corner and closed his eyes. Occasionally Drake would hear a muffled growl, and, looking in that direction, would see one inflamed eye peering from a mountain of rugs.

'Satire!' and a husky voice would address the passengers indiscriminately. 'Satire! and the man's not a day under forty either.'

Drake joined in the laugh and lit his pipe. He was not sensitive to miscomputations of his years, and felt disinclined to provoke further outbursts of family confidences.

Instead, he pursued his acquaintance with *A Man of Influence*, realising now that he must take him seriously and regard him stamped with Mallinson's approval, a dominating being. He found the task difficult. The character insisted upon reminding him of the nursery-maid's ideal, the dandified breaker of hearts and bender of wills; an analytical hero too, who traced the sentence through the thought to the emotion, which originally prompted it; whence his success and influence. But for his strength, plainly aimed at by the author, and to be conceded by the reader, if the book was to convince? Drake compared him to scree and shingle as against solid granite. Lean on him and you slip!

The plot was the time-worn, imperishable story of the married couple and the amorous interloper, the Influential Man, of course, figuring as the latter, and consequently glorified. The husband was pelted with ridicule from the first chapter to the last, though for what particular fault Drake could not discover, unless it were for that of being a husband at all; so that the interloper in robbing him of his wife was related to have secured not merely the *succès d'estime* which accompanies such enviable feats, but the unqualified gratitude of all married women and most unmarried men.

There were, no doubt, redeeming qualities; Drake gave them full credit, and perhaps more than they deserved. He noticed a glitter in the dialogue, whether of foil or gold he refused to consider, and a lively imagination in the interweaving of the incidents. But altogether the book left with him a feeling of distaste, which was not allayed by the

perception that he himself was caricatured in the picture of befooled husband, while Mallinson figured as the successful deceiver. After all, he thought, Mallinson and he were friends, and he disliked the mere imagining of such a relationship between them.

Drake summed up his impressions as his hansom turned into the Bayswater Road. The day was just beginning to break; the stems of the trees bordering the park were black bars against the pure, colourless light, and their mingling foliage a frayed black ribbon stretched across the sky. One might have conceived the picture the original of a black and white drawing by a pre-Raphaelite artist.

Drake drew in a long breath of the keen, clear air.

'I am glad I asked him to bring Conway,' he said to himself.

CHAPTER II

Waking up six hours later, Drake looked out upon a brown curtain of London fog. The lamps were lit at the crossings in Trafalgar Square—half-a-mile distant they seemed, opaque haloes about a pin's point of flame, and people passing in the light of them loomed and vanished like the figures of a galanty-show. From beneath rose the bustle of the streets, perceptible only to Drake, upon the fourth floor, as a subterranean rumble. 'London,' he said to himself, 'I live here,' and laughed unappalled. Listening to the clamour, he remembered a map, seen somewhere in a railway guide, a map of England with the foreign cables, tiny spider-threads spun to the four quarters and thickening to a solid column at Falmouth and Cromer, the world's arteries, he liked to think, converging to its heart.

The notion of messages flashing hourly along these wires brought to mind the existence of the *Meteor*. He sent out for a copy of each number which had appeared since he had begun his voyage, and commencing on the task whilst he was still at breakfast, read through every article written concerning the Boruwimi expedition. He finished the last in the smoking-room shortly after one o'clock, and rose from his investigation with every appearance of relief. From the first to the final paragraph, not so much as a mention of Gorley's name!

The reason for his relief lay in a promise which he had sent to Gorley's father, that he would suppress the trouble as far as he could; and Drake liked to keep his promises.

Gorley had come out to Matanga with a cloudy reputation winging close at his heels. There were rumours of dishonesty in the office of a private bank in Kent; his name became a sign for silence, and you were allowed to infer that Gorley's relatives had made good the deficit and so avoided a criminal prosecution. It was not surprising, then, that Gorley, on hearing of Drake's intended march to Boruwimi, should wish to take service under his command. He called upon Drake with that request, was confronted with the current story, and invited to disprove it. Gorley read his man shrewdly, and confessed the truth of the charge without an attempt at mitigation. He asked frankly for a place in the troop, the lowest, as his chance of redemption, or rather demanded it as a grace due from man to man. Drake was taken by his manner, noticed his build, which was tough and wiry, and conceded the request. Nor had he reason to regret his decision on the march out. Gorley showed himself alert, and vigilant, a favourite with the blacks, and obedient to his officers. He was advanced from duty to duty; a week before the force began its homeward march from Boruwimi he was sent out with a body of men to forage for provisions. Three days later a solitary negro rushed into camp, one of the few survivors of his tribe, he said. He told a story of food freely given, a village plundered and burned for thanks, of gold-dust stolen and the owners murdered that they might the better hold their tongues. He signified Gorley as the culprit. Drake, guided by the negro,

marched towards the spot. He met Gorley and his company half-way between Boruwimi and the village, carried him along with him, and proved the story true. Against Gorley's troops no charge could be sustained; they had only obeyed orders. But Gorley he court-martialled, and the result has been described.

This was the incident which Drake was unwilling to commit to the discretion of the editor of the *Meteor*. He had discovered Gorley's relations in England, and had written to them a full account of the affair, despatching with his letter a copy of the evidence given at the court-martial. The reply came from the father, a heart-broken admission of the justice of Drake's action, and a prayer that, for the sake of those of the family who still lived, Gorley's crime should be as far as possible kept secret. Drake gave the promise. So far he had kept it, he realised, as he tossed aside the last copy of the *Meteor*.

At eight o'clock Sidney Mallinson arrived. He saw Drake at the top of the flight of steps in the vestibule, and hesitated, perceiving that he was alone.

'Hasn't Conway come?' he asked. 'I sent to him.'

'Not yet. It's barely eight.'

They shook hands limply and searched for topics of conversation.

'You look older than you did,' said Mallinson.