

CHAPTER III

DIANA

Diana Von Taer can not be called a type. She was individual. Aristocratic to her finger tips, she was unlike all other aristocrats. An admitted queen of society, her subjects were few and indifferent. She possessed ancient lineage, was highly accomplished, had been born to the purple, as the saying is; but none of these things conspired to make her the curious creature she was.

As we make her acquaintance she is twenty-three years of age--and looks eighteen. She is tall and slender and carries her handsome form with exquisite grace. Diana is never abrupt; her voice is ever modulated to soft, even tones; she rises from a chair or couch with the lithe, sinuous motion of a serpent uncoiling.

Her face, critically regarded, is not so admirable as her form. The features are a trifle too elongated, and their delicacy is marred by a nose a bit broad and unshapely and a mouth with thin lips primly set. Her dark eyes might be magnificent if wide open: but through the narrow slits of their lids, half hidden by long curling lashes, the eyes peer at you with a cold, watchful, intent gaze that carries a certain uncanny and disconcerting fascination.

Yet the girl is essentially feminine. If you refrain from meeting that discomfiting gaze--and her familiars have learned to avoid it--Diana impresses you as being graceful, dainty and possessed of charming manners. Her taste in dress is perfect. She converses fluently on many topics. It is her custom to rise at ten o'clock, whatever time she may have retired the night before; to read until luncheon; to devote the remainder of her day to the requirements of society.

Eligible young men of admitted social standing call upon Diana at such intervals as the proprieties require. They chatter "small talk" and are careful to address her with deference. With an exception to be referred to later these young men have no more thought of "flirting" with Miss Von Taer than they would with the statue of the goddess, her namesake. Her dinner parties and entertainments are very successful. She is greatly admired, *per se*, but has no intimate friends.

When her mother died, some years before, an aunt had come to live with Diana, and now posed as her chaperon. Mrs. Cameron was a stolid, corpulent lady, with a countenance perpetually placid and an habitual aversion to displaying intellect. Her presence in the establishment, although necessary, was frankly ignored. Fortunately she never obtruded herself.

Hedrik Von Taer was passionately devoted to his daughter. He alone, perhaps, of all the world, thoroughly understood her and appreciated her talents. She may have frightened him at times, but that only added to

his admiration. In return Diana displayed a calm, but affectionate regard for her father.

Often after dinner these two would pass an hour together in a corner of the drawing-room, where the cold gray eyes of the man met the intent, half-veiled glance of the girl with perfect understanding. They talked of many things, including business. Hedrik had no secrets from his daughter. The desperate condition of his finances, when he had been caught in a "corner" on wheat and nearly crushed, had not dismayed her in the least. It was she who had counseled him to appeal to John Merrick, since the name and fame of the eccentric millionaire were familiar to her as to him.

He related to Diana his interview with Mr. Merrick on his return home. He was saved. The three hundred thousand were now in the bank to his credit and he could weather the coming storm easily--perhaps with profit. In a tone half amused, half serious, he told her of the little millionaire's desire to secure entrée into good society for his three nieces.

Diana laughed with her lips; her eyes never laughed. Then she took in her hand the paper containing the addresses of the three girls and regarded it thoughtfully.

"It is a curious request, mon pere," she said, in her soft, even tones; "but one we cannot diplomatically disregard. Provided, however--"

"Yes, Diana;" as she paused.

"Provided these prospective debutantes are not wholly impossible."

"I realize that," returned her father. "John Merrick is a great power in the city. He has been useful to me, and may be again. I have this chance to win him. But the man is very common clay, despite his wealth, and his three nieces are likely to be made of the same material. Should they prove impossible you cannot well descend to introducing them to our set."

"I am not certain of that, sir," said the girl, with a pretty shrug. "My position is too secure to be jeopardized by any error of this sort. I believe I may introduce these girls without risk. I shall not vouch for them too strongly, and after their debut they must stand or fall on their own merits."

"It is something a Von Taer has never yet done," remarked the man, gravely.

"To commercialize his social position? But, father dear, the age is fast commercializing everything. I think our especial set is as yet comparatively free from contamination by the 'lately rich'; but even among us money has glossed many offenses that a generation ago would have meant social ostracism."

He nodded.

"That is true, Diana."

"Life with me is a bit dull, as well. Everlasting routine, however admirable, is tiresome. I scent amusement in this adventure, which I have decided to undertake. With your permission I will see these girls and quickly decide their fate. Should they prove not too dreadfully outré you may look to see them my especial protégés."

"I leave all to your discretion, Diana," returned Von Taer, with a sigh.
"If, in the end, some of the more particular venture to reproach them."

"It will not matter," interrupted the daughter, lightly, as her dark eyes narrowed to a hair's breadth. "Any who dares reproach Diana Von Taer will afford her interesting occupation. And to offset that remote contingency we shall permanently enslave the powerful John Merrick. I understand he is hard as nails in financial matters; but to us the man has disclosed his one weakness--ambition to promote his three nieces. Since we have discovered this vulnerable point, let us take advantage of it. I am satisfied the loan of three hundred thousand was but a lure--and how cleverly the man gauged us!"

Von Taer scowled.

"Get your wraps, Diana. The carriage is waiting, and we are due at Mrs. Doldringham's crush."