CHAPTER IV

THE THREE NIECES

The Von Taers did not affect motor cars. In some circles the carriage and pair is still considered the more aristocratic mode of conveyance. Established customs do not readily give way to fads and freaks.

Consulting her memoranda as she rode along; in her handsome, tastefully appointed equipage, Diana found that Louise Merrick, one of the three girls she had set out to discover, was the nearest on her route. Presently she rang the bell at the Merrick residence, an eminently respectable dwelling; in a desirable neighborhood.

Diana could not resist a sigh of relief as her observant glance noted this detail. A dignified butler ushered her into a reception room and departed with her card.

It was now that the visitor's nose took an upward tendency as she critically examined her surroundings. The furnishings were abominable, a mixture of distressingly new articles with those evidently procured from dealers in "antiquities." Money had been lavished here, but good taste was absent. To understand this--for Miss Von Taer gauged the condition truly--it is necessary to know something of Mrs. Martha Merrick.

This lady, the relict of John Merrick's only brother, was endowed with a mediocre mind and a towering ambition. When left a widow with an only daughter she had schemed and contrived in endless ways to maintain an appearance of competency on a meager income. Finally she divided her capital, derived from her husband's life insurance, into three equal parts, which she determined to squander in three years in an attempt to hoodwink the world with the belief that she was wealthy. Before the three years were ended her daughter Louise would be twenty, and by that time she must have secured a rich parti and been safely married. In return for this "sacrifice" the girl was to see that her mother was made comfortable thereafter.

This worldly and foolish design was confided to Louise when she was only seventeen, and her unformed mind easily absorbed her mother's silly ambition. It was a pity, for Louise Merrick possessed a nature sweet and lovable, as well as instinctively refined--a nature derived from her dead father and with little true sympathy with Mrs. Merrick's unscrupulous schemes. But at that age a girl is easily influenced, so it is little wonder that under such tuition Louise became calculating, sly and deceitful, to a most deplorable degree.

Such acquired traits bade fair in the end to defeat Mrs. Merrick's carefully planned coup, for the daughter had a premature love affair with a youth outside the pale of eligibility. Louise ignored the fact that he had been disinherited by his father, and in her reckless

infatuation would have sacrificed her mother without thought or remorse. The dreadful finale had only been averted by the advent of Uncle John Merrick, who had changed the life plans of the widow and her heedless daughter and promptly saved the situation.

John Merrick did not like his sister-in-law, but he was charmed by his lovely niece and took her at once to his affectionate old heart. He saw the faults of Louise clearly, but also appreciated her sweeter qualities. Under his skillful guidance she soon redeemed herself and regained control of her better nature. The girl was not yet perfect, by any means; she was to an extent artificial and secretive, and her thoughtless flirtations were far from wise; but her two cousins and her uncle had come to know and understand her good points. They not only bore patiently with her volatile nature but strove to influence her to demonstrate her inherent good qualities.

In one way her mother's calculating training had been most effective. Louise was not only a dainty, lovely maid to the eye, but her manners were gracious and winning and she had that admirable self-possession which quickly endears one even to casual acquaintances. She did not impress more intimate friends as being wholly sincere, yet there was nothing in her acts, since that one escapade referred to, that merited severe disapproval.

Of course the brilliant idea of foisting her precious daughter upon the "select" society of the metropolis was original with Mrs. Merrick.

Louise was well content with things as they were; but not so the mother. The rise from poverty to affluence, the removal of all cares and burdens from her mind, had merely fostered still greater ambitions. Uncle John's generosity had endowed each of his three nieces with an ample fortune. "I want 'em to enjoy the good things of life while they're at an age to enjoy 'em," he said; "for the older one gets the fewer things are found to be enjoyable. That's my experience, anyhow." He also told the girls frankly that they were to inherit jointly--although not equally--his entire fortune. Yet even this glowing prospect did not satisfy Mrs. Merrick. Since all her plans for Louise, from the very beginning, had been founded on personal selfishness, she now proposed to have her daughter gain admission to recognized fashionable society in order that she might herself bask in the reflection of the glory so obtained and take her place with the proud matrons who formed the keystone of such society. After carefully considering ways and means to gain her object she had finally conceived the idea of utilizing Mr. Merrick. She well knew Uncle John would not consider one niece to the exclusion of the others, and had therefore used his influence to get all three girls properly "introduced." Therefore her delight and excitement were intense when the butler brought up Diana's card and she realized that "the perfectly swell Miss Von Taer" was seated in her reception room. She rushed to Louise, who, wholly innocent of any knowledge of the intrigue which had led to this climax, opened her blue eyes in astonishment and said with a gasp:

"Oh, mother! what shall I do?"

"Do? Why, go down and make yourself agreeable, of course. It's your chance, my dear, your great chance in life! Go--go! Don't, for heaven's sake, keep her waiting."

Louise went down. In her most affable and gracious way she approached the visitor and said:

"It is very nice of you to call upon me. I am so glad to meet Miss Von Taer." Diana, passing conversational nothings with the young girl, was pleased by her appearance and self-possession. This aspirant for social honors was fresh, fair and attractive, with a flow of small talk at her tongue's end.

"Really," thought the fastidious visitor, "this one, at least, will do me no discredit. If she is a fair sample of the others we shall get along very nicely In this enterprise."

To Louise she said, before going:

"I'm to have an evening, the nineteenth. Will you assist me to receive? Now that we are acquainted I wish to see more of you, my dear, and I predict we shall get along famously together."

The girl's head swam. Help Miss Von Taer to receive! Such an honor had been undreamed of an hour ago. But she held her natural agitation under

good control and only a round red spot Upon each cheek betrayed her inward excitement as she prettily accepted the invitation. Beneath their drooping lashes Diana's sagacious eyes read the thoughts of the girl quite accurately. Miss Von Taer enjoyed disconcerting anyone in any way, and Louise was so simple and unsophisticated that she promised to afford considerable amusement in the future.

By the time Diana had finished her brief call this singular creature had taken the measure of Louise Merrick in every detail, including her assumption of lightness and her various frivolities. She understood that in the girl were capabilities for good or for evil, as she might be led by a stronger will. And, musingly, Diana wondered who would lead her.

As for Louise, she was enraptured by her distinguished visitor's condescension and patronage, and her heart bounded at the thought of being admitted to the envied social coterie in which Diana Von Taer shone a bright, particular star.

The second name in the list of John Merrick's nieces was that of Elizabeth De Graf. She lived at a good private hotel located in an exclusive residence district.

It was true that Elizabeth--or "Beth," as she was more familiarly called--was not a permanent guest at this hotel. When in New York she was accustomed to live with one or the other of her cousins, who welcomed her eagerly. But just now her mother had journeyed from the old

Ohio home to visit Beth, and the girl had no intention of inflicting her parent upon the other girls. Therefore she had taken rooms at the hotel temporarily, and the plan suited her mother excellently. For one thing, Mrs. De Graf could go home and tell her Cloverton gossips that she had stopped at the most "fashionable" hotel in New York; a second point was that she loved to feast with epicurean avidity upon the products of a clever chef, being one of those women who live to eat, rather than eat to live.

Mrs. De Graf was John Merrick's only surviving sister, but she differed as widely from the simple, kindly man in disposition as did her ingenious daughter from her in mental attainments. The father, Professor De Graf, was supposed to be a "musical genius." Before Beth came into her money, through Uncle John, the Professor taught the piano and singing; now, however, the daughter allowed her parents a liberal income, and the self-engrossed musician devoted himself to composing oratorios and concertas which no one but himself would ever play. To be quite frank, the girl cared little for her gross and selfish parents, and they in turn cared little for her beyond the value she afforded them in the way of dollars and cents. So she had not lived at home, where constant quarrels and bickerings nearly drove her frantic, since Uncle John had adopted her. In catering to this present whim of her mother, who longed to spend a few luxurious weeks in New York, Beth sacrificed more than might be imagined by one unacquainted with her sad family history.

Whimsical Major Doyle often called Uncle John's nieces "the Three Graces"; but Beth was by odds the beauty of them all. Splendid brown eyes, added to an exquisite complexion, almost faultless features and a superb carriage, rendered this fair young girl distinguished in any throng. Fortunately she was as yet quite unspoiled, being saved from vanity by a morbid consciousness of her inborn failings and a sincere loathing for the moral weakness that prevented her from correcting those faults. Judging Beth by the common standard of girls of her age, both failings and faults were more imaginary than real; yet it was her characteristic to suspect and despise in herself such weaknesses as others would condone, or at least regard leniently. For here was a girl true and staunch, incapable of intrigue or deceit, frank and outspoken, all these qualities having been proven more than once. Everyone loved Beth De Graf save herself, and at this stage of her development the influence of her cousins and of Uncle John had conspired to make the supersensitive girl more tolerant of herself and less morbid than formerly.

I think Beth knew of Diana Von Taer, for the latter's portrait frequently graced the society columns of the New York press and at times the three nieces, in confidential mood, would canvass Diana and her social exploits as they did the acts of other famous semi-public personages. But the girl had never dreamed of meeting such a celebrity, and Miss Von Taer's card filled her with curious wonder as to the errand that had brought her.

The De Grafs lived en suite at the hotel, for Beth had determined to surround her Sybaritic mother with all attainable luxury, since the child frequently reproached herself with feeling a distinct repulsion for the poor woman. So to-day Diana was ushered into a pretty parlor where Beth stood calmly awaiting her.

The two regarded one another in silence a moment, Miss De Graf's frank eyes covering the other with a comprehensive sweep while Miss Von Taer's narrowed gaze, profoundly observant, studied the beautiful girl before her with that impenetrable, half-hidden gleam that precluded any solution.

"Miss Von Taer, I believe," said Beth, quietly glancing at the card she held. "Will you be seated?"

Diana sank gracefully into a chair. The sinuous motion attracted Beth's attention and gave her a slight shiver.

"I am so glad to meet you, my dear," began the visitor, in soft, purring accents. "I have long promised myself the pleasure of a call, and in spite of many procrastinations at last have accomplished my ambition."

Beth resented the affectation of this prelude, and slightly frowned. Diana was watching; she always watched. "Why should you wish to call upon me?" was the frank demand. "Do not think me rude, please; but I am scarcely in a position to become a desirable acquaintance of Miss Von

Taer." The tone was a trifle bitter, and Diana noted it. A subtile antagonism seemed springing up between them and the more experienced girl scented in this danger to her plans. She must handle this young lady more cautiously than she had Louise Merrick.

"Your position is unimpeachable, my dear," was the sweet-toned response. "You are John Merrick's niece."

Beth was really angry now. She scowled, and it spoiled her beauty. Diana took warning and began to think quickly.

"I referred to my social position, Miss Von Taer. Our family is honest enough, thank God; but it has never been accepted in what is termed select society."

Diana laughed; a quiet, rippling laugh as icy as a brook in November, but as near gaiety as she could at the moment accomplish. When she laughed this way her eyes nearly closed and became inscrutable. Beth had a feeling of repulsion for her caller, but strove to shake it off. Miss Von Taer was nothing to her; could be nothing to her.

"Your uncle is a very wealthy man," said Diana, with easy composure. "He has made you an heiress, placing you in a class much sought after in these mercenary days. But aside from that, my dear, your personal accomplishments have not escaped notice, and gossip declares you to be a very fascinating young woman, as well as beautiful and good. I do not

imagine society claims to be of divine origin, but were it so no one is more qualified to grace it."

The blandishments of this speech had less effect upon Beth than the evident desire to please. She began to feel she had been ungracious, and straightway adopted a more cordial tone.

"I am sure you mean well, Miss Von Taer," she hastened to say, "and I assure you I am not ungrateful. But it occurred to me we could have nothing in common." "Oh, my dear! You wrong us both."

"Do you know my uncle?" enquired Beth.

"He is the friend of my father, Mr. Hedrik Von Taer. Our family owes Mr. John Merrick much consideration. Therefore I decided to seek pleasure in the acquaintance of his nieces."

The words and tone seemed alike candid. Beth began to relent. She sat down for the first time, taking a chair opposite Diana.

"You see," she said, artlessly, "I have no personal inclination for society, which is doubtless so large a part of your own amusement. It seems to me artificial and insipid."

"Those who view from a distance the husk of a cocoanut, have little idea of the milk within," declared Diana, softly.

"True," answered Beth. "But I've cracked cocoanuts, and sometimes found the milk sour and tainted."

"The difference you observe in cocoanuts is to be found in the various grades of society. These are not all insipid and artificial, I assure you."

"They may be worse," remarked Beth. "I've heard strange tales of your orgies." Diana was really amused. This girl was proving more interesting than the first niece she had interviewed. Unaccustomed to seeking acquaintances outside her own exclusive circle, and under such circumstances, these meetings were to her in the nature of an adventure. A creature of powerful likes and dislikes, she already hated Beth most heartily; but for that very reason she insisted on cultivating her further acquaintance.

"You must not judge society by the mad pranks of a few of its members," she responded, in her most agreeable manner. "If we are not to set an example in decorum to the rest of the world we are surely unfitted to occupy the high place accorded us. But you must see and decide for yourself."

"I? No, indeed!"

"Ah, do not decide hastily, my dear. Let me become your sponsor for a

short time, until you really discover what society is like. Then you may act upon more mature judgment."

"I do not understand you, Miss Von Taer."

"Then I will be more explicit. I am to receive a few friends at my home on the evening of the nineteenth; will you be my guest?" Beth was puzzled how to answer. The thought crossed her mind that perhaps Uncle John would like her to be courteous to his friend's daughter, and that argument decided her. She accepted the invitation.

"I want you to receive with me," continued Diana, rising. "In that way I shall be able to introduce you to my friends."

Beth wondered at this condescension, but consented to receive. She was annoyed to think how completely she had surrendered to the will of Miss Von Taer, for whom she had conceived the same aversion she had for a snake. She estimated Diana, society belle though she was, to be sly, calculating and deceitful. Worse than all, she was decidedly clever, and therefore dangerous. Nothing good could come of an acquaintance with her, Beth was sure; yet she had pledged herself to meet her and her friends the nineteenth, lit a formal society function. How much Beth De Graf misjudged Diana Von Taer the future will determine. The interview had tired Diana. As she reentered her carriage she was undecided whether to go home or hunt up the third niece. But Willing Square was not five minutes' drive from here, so she ordered the coachman to proceed there.

"I am positively out of my element in this affair," she told herself, "for it is more difficult to cultivate these inexperienced girls than I had thought. They are not exactly impossible, as I at first feared, but they are so wholly unconventional as to be somewhat embarrassing as protégées. Analyzing the two I have met--the majority--one strikes me as being transparently affected and the other a stubborn, attractive fool. They are equally untrained in diplomacy and unable to cover their real feelings. Here am I, practically dragging them into the limelight, when it would be far better for themselves--perhaps for me--that they remained in oblivion. Ah, well: I called it an adventure: let me hope some tangible plot will develop to compensate me for my trouble. Life seems deadly dull; I need excitement. Is it to be furnished by John Merrick's nieces, I wonder?" Willing Square is a new district, crowded with fashionable apartment houses. That is, they are called fashionable by their builders and owners and accepted as such by their would-be fashionable occupants. Diana knew at least two good families resident in Willing Square, and though she smiled grimly at the rows of "oppressively new and vulgar" buildings, she still was not ashamed to have her equipage seen waiting there.

Number 3708 Willing Square is a very substantial and cozy appearing apartment building owned in fee by Miss Patricia Doyle. Diana was unaware of this fact, but rang the Doyle bell and ascended to the second floor.

A maid received her with the announcement that Miss Doyle had "just stepped out," but was somewhere in the building. Would the visitor care to wait a few minutes?

Yes; Diana decided she would wait. She took a seat in the snug front parlor and from her position noted the series of rooms that opened one into another throughout the suite, all richly but tastefully furnished in homely, unassuming manner. "This is better," she mused. "There is no attempt at foolish display in this establishment, at any rate. I hope to find Miss Doyle a sensible, refined person. The name is Irish."

A door slammed somewhere down the line of rooms and a high-pitched voice cried in excited tones:

"I've found a baby! Hi, there, Nunkie, dear--I've found a baby!"

Thereupon came the sound of a chair being pushed back as a man's voice answered in equal glee:

"Why, Patsy, Patsy! it's the little rogue from upstairs. Here, Bobby; come to your own old Uncle!"

"He won't. He belongs to me; don't you, Bobby darlin'?"

A babyish voice babbled merrily, but the sounds were all "goos" and "ahs" without any resemblance to words. Bobby may have imagined he was

talking, but he was not very intelligible.

"See here, Patsy Doyle; you gimme that baby." cried the man, pleadingly. "I found him myself, and he's mine. I've dragged him here all the way from his home upstairs, an' don't you dare lay a finger on him. Uncle John!"

"Fair play, Patsy! Bobby's my chum, and--"

"Well, I'll let you have half of him, Nunkie. Down on your hands and knees, sir, and be a horse. That's it--Now, Bobby, straddle Uncle John and drive him by his necktie--here it is. S-t-e-a-d-y, Uncle; and neigh--neigh like a horse!"

"How does a horse neigh, Patsy?" asked a muffled voice, choking and chuckling at the same time.

"'Nee, hee-hee--hee; hee!'"

Uncle John tried to neigh, and made a sorry mess of it, although Bobby shrieked with delight.

Then came a sudden hush. Diana caught the maid's voice, perhaps announcing the presence of a visitor, for Patsy cried in subdued accents:

"Goodness me, Mary! why didn't you say so? Listen, Uncle John--"

"Leggo that ear, Bobby--leggo!"

"--You watch the baby, Uncle John, and don't let anything happen to him. I've got a caller."

Diana smiled, a bit scornfully, and then composed her features as a young girl bustled into the room and came toward her with frank cordiality indicated in the wide smile and out-stretched hand.

"Pardon my keeping you waiting," said Patsy, dropping into a chair opposite her visitor, "Uncle John and I were romping with the baby from upstarts--Bobby's such a dear! I didn't quite catch the name Mary gave me and forgot to look at your card."

"I am Miss Von Taer."

"Not Diana Von Taer, the swell society girl?" cried Patsy eagerly.

Diana couldn't remember when she had been so completely nonplused before. After an involuntary gasp she answered quietly:

"I am Diana Von Taer."

"Well, I'm glad to meet you, just the same," said Patsy, cheerfully. "We

outsiders are liable to look on society folk as we would on a cage of monkeys--because we're so very ignorant, you know, and the bars are really between us." This frank disdain verged on rudeness, although the girl had no intention of being rude. Diana was annoyed in spite of her desire to be tolerant.

"Perhaps the bars are imaginary," she rejoined, carelessly, "and it may be you've been looking at the side-show and not at the entertainment in the main tent. Will you admit that possibility, Miss Doyle?"

Patsy laughed gleefully.

"I think you have me there, Miss Von Taer. And what do I know about society? Just nothing at all. It's out of my line entirely."

"Perhaps it is," was the slow response. "Society appeals to only those whose tastes seem to require it."

"And aren't we drawing distinctions?" enquired Miss Doyle. "Society at large is the main evidence of civilization, and all decent folk are members of it."

"Isn't that communism?" asked Diana.

"Perhaps so. It's society at large. But certain classes have leagued together and excluded themselves from their fellows, admitting only

those of their own ilk. The people didn't put them on their pedestals--they put themselves there. Yet the people bow down and worship these social gods and seem glad to have them. The newspapers print their pictures and the color of their gowns and how they do their hair and what they eat and what they do, and the poor washwomen and shop-girls and their like read these accounts more religiously than they do their bibles. My maid Mary's a good girl, but she grabs the society sheet of the Sunday paper and reads it from top to bottom. I never look at it myself."

Diana's cheeks were burning. She naturally resented such ridicule, having been born to regard social distinction with awe and reverence. Inwardly resolving to make Miss Patricia Doyle regret the speech she hid all annoyance under her admirable self-control and answered with smooth complacency:

"Your estimate of society, my dear Miss Doyle, is superficial."

"Don't I know it, then?" exclaimed Patsy. "Culture and breeding, similarity of taste and intellectual pursuits will always attract certain people and band them together in those cliques which are called 'social sets,' They are not secret societies; they have no rules of exclusion; congenial minds are ever welcome to their ranks. This is a natural coalition, in no way artificial. Can you not appreciate that, Miss Doyle?"

"Yes, indeed," admitted Patsy, promptly. "You're quite right, and I'm just one of those stupid creatures who criticise the sun because there's a cloud before it. Probably there are all grades of society, because there are all grades of people."

"I thought you would agree with me when you understood," murmured Diana,
and her expression was so smug and satisfied that Patsy was seized with an irresistible spirit of mischief.

"And haven't I seen your own pictures in the Sunday papers?" she asked.

"Perhaps; if you robbed your maid of her pleasure."

"And very pretty pictures they were, too. They showed culture and breeding all right, and the latest style in gowns. Of course those intellectual high-brows in your set didn't need an introduction to you; you were advertised as an example of ultra-fashionable perfection, to spur the ambition of those lower down in the social scale. Perhaps it's a good thing."

"Are you trying to annoy me?" demanded Diana, her eyes glaring under their curling lashes.

"Dear me--dear me!" cried Patsy, distressed, "see how saucy and impudent I've been--and I didn't mean a bit of it! Won't you forgive me, please,

Miss Von Taer? There! we'll begin all over again, and I'll be on my good behavior. I'm so very ignorant, you know!"

Diana smiled at this; it would be folly to show resentment to such a childish creature.

"Unfortunately," she said, "I have been unable to escape the vulgar publicity thrust upon me by the newspapers. The reporters are preying vultures, rapacious for sensation, and have small respect for anyone. I am sure we discourage them as much as we can. I used to weep with mortification when I found myself 'written up'; now, however, I have learned to bear such trials with fortitude--if not with resignation."
"Forgive me!" said Patsy, contritely. "Somehow I've had a false idea of these things. If I knew you better, Miss Von Taer, you'd soon convert me to be an admirer of society."

"I'd like to do that, Miss Doyle, for you interest me. Will you return my call?"

"Indeed I will," promised the girl, readily. "I'm flattered that you called on me at all, Miss Von Taer, for you might easily have amused yourself better. You must be very busy, with all the demands society makes on one. When shall I come? Make it some off time, when we won't be disturbed."

Diana smiled at her eagerness. How nescient the poor little thing was!

"Your cousins, Miss Merrick and Miss De Graf, have consented to receive with me on the evening of the nineteenth. Will you not join us?"

"Louise and Beth!" cried Patsy, astounded.

"Isn't it nice of them? And may I count upon you, also?"

Patsy smiled dubiously into the other's face.

"Let me out of it!" she said. "Can't you see I'm no butterfly?"

Diana saw many things, having taken a shrewd account of the girl long before this. Miss Patricia Doyle was short and plump, with a round, merry face covered with freckles, hair indisputably red and a retroussé nose. Also she possessed a pair of wonderful blue eyes--eyes that danced and scintillated with joyous good humor--eyes so captivating that few ever looked beyond them or noted the plain face they glorified. But the critic admitted that the face was charmingly expressive, the sweet and sensitive mouth always in sympathy with the twinkling, candid eyes. Life and energy radiated from her small person, which Miss Von Taer grudgingly conceded to possess unusual fascination. Here was a creature quite imperfect in detail, yet destined to allure and enchant whomsoever she might meet. All this was quite the reverse of Diana's own frigid personality. Patsy would make an excellent foil for her.

"As you please, my dear," she said graciously; "but do you not think it would amuse you to make your debut in society--unimpeachable society--and be properly introduced to the occupants of the 'pedestals,' as your cousins will be?"

Patsy reflected. If Beth and Louise had determined to undertake this venture why should she hold back? Moreover, she experienced a girlish and wholly natural curiosity to witness a fashionable gathering and "size up" the lions for herself. So she said:

"I'll come, if you really want me; and I'll try my best to behave nicely. But I can't imagine why you have chosen to take us three girls under your wing; unless--" with sudden intuition, "it's for Uncle John's sake."

"That was it, at first," replied Diana, rising to go; "but now that I've seen you I'm delighted to have you on your own account. Come early, dear; we must be ready to receive our guests by nine."

"Nine o'clock!" reflected Patsy, when her visitor had gone; "why, I'm often in bed by that time."