

## CHAPTER V

### PREPARING FOR THE PLUNGE

John Merrick lived with the Doyles at their Willing Square apartments. There were but two of the Doyles--Patricia and her father, Major Doyle, a tall, handsome, soldierly man with white moustache and hair. The Major was noted as a "character," a keen wit and a most agreeable type of the "old Irish gentleman." He fairly worshipped his daughter, and no one blamed him for it. His business, as special agent and manager for his brother-in-law's millions, kept the Major closely occupied and afforded John Merrick opportunity to spend his days as he pleased. The rich man was supposed to be "retired," yet the care of his investments and income was no light task, as the Major found.

We are accustomed to regard extreme wealth as the result of hard-headed shrewdness, not wholly divorced from unscrupulous methods, yet no one could accuse John Merrick or his representative with being other than kindly, simple-hearted and honest. Uncle John says that he never intended to "get rich"; it was all the result of carelessness. He had been so immersed in business that he failed to notice how fast his fortune was growing. When he awoke to a realization of his immense accumulation he promptly retired, appointing Major Doyle to look after his investments and seeking personal leisure after many years of hard work. He instructed his agent to keep his income from growing into more

capital by rendering wise assistance to all worthy charities and individuals, and this, as you may suppose, the Major found a herculean task. Often he denounced Uncle John for refusing to advise him, claiming that the millionaire had selfishly thrust the burden of his wealth on the Major's broad shoulders. While there was an element of truth in this the burden it was not so heavy as to make the old soldier unhappy, and the two men loved and respected one another with manly cordiality.

Patricia was recognized as Uncle John's favorite niece and it was understood she was to inherit the bulk of his property, although some millions might be divided between Beth and Louise "if they married wisely." Neither Uncle John nor the Major ever seemed to consider Patsy's marrying; she was such a child that wedlock for her seemed a remote possibility.

The Sunday afternoon following Diana Von Taer's visit to the three nieces found the girls all congregated in Patsy's own room, where an earnest discussion was being conducted. That left Uncle John to take his after-dinner nap in the big Morris chair in the living room, where Major Doyle sat smoking-sulkily while he gazed from the window and begrudged the moments Patsy was being kept from him.

Finally the door opened and the three girls trooped out.

"Huh! Is the conspiracy all cut-an'-dried?" growled the Major.

Uncle John woke up with a final snort, removed the newspaper from his face and sat up. He smiled benignantly upon his nieces.

"It's all your fault, sor!" declared Major Doyle, selecting the little millionaire as the safest recipient of his displeasure. "Your foolishness has involved us all in this dreadful complication. Why on earth couldn't you leave well-enough alone?"

Uncle John received the broadside with tolerant equanimity.

"What's wrong; my dears?" he enquired, directing his mild glance toward the bevy of young girls.

"I am unaware that anything is wrong, Uncle," replied Louise gravely.

"But since we are about to make our debut in society it is natural we should have many things to discuss that would prove quite uninteresting to men. Really, Uncle John, this is a great event--perhaps the most important event of our lives."

"Shucks an' shoestrings!" grunted the Major. "What's in this paper-shelled, painted, hollow thing ye call 'society' to interest three healthy, wide-awake girls? Tell me that!"

"You don't understand, dear," said Patsy, soothing him with a kiss.

"I think he does," remarked Beth, with meditative brows. "Modern society

is a man-made--or woman-made--condition, to a large extent artificial, selfish and unwholesome."

"Oh, Beth!" protested Louise. "You're talking like a rank socialist. I can understand common people sneering at society, which is so far out of their reach; but a girl about to be accepted in the best circles has no right to rail at her own caste."

"There can be no caste in America," declared Beth, stubbornly.

"But there is caste in America, and will be so long as the exclusiveness of society is recognized by the people at large," continued Louise. "If it is a 'man-made condition' isn't it the most respected, most refined, most desirable condition that one may attain to?"

"There are plenty of honest and happy people in the world who ignore society altogether," answered Beth. "It strikes me that your social stars are mighty few in the broad firmament of humanity."

"But they're stars, for all that, dear," said Uncle John, smiling at her with a hint of approval in his glance, yet picking up the argument; "and they look mighty big and bright to the crowd below. It's quite natural. You can't keep individuals from gaining distinction, even in America. There are few generals in an army, for instance; and they're 'man-made'; but that's no reason the generals ain't entitled to our admiration."

"Let's admire 'em, then--from a distance," retorted the Major, realizing the military simile was employed to win his sympathy.

"Certain things, my dear Major, are naturally dear to a girl's heart," continued Uncle John, musingly; "and we who are not girls have no right to condemn their natural longings. Girls love dancing, pink teas and fudge-parties, and where can they find 'em in all their perfection but in high society? Girls love admiration and flirtations--you do, my dears; you can't deny it--and the male society swells have the most time to devote to such things. Girls love pretty dresses--"

"Oh, Uncle! you've hit the nail on the head now," exclaimed Patsy, laughing. "We must all have new gowns for this reception, and as we're to assist Miss Von Taer the dresses must harmonize, so to speak, and--and--" "And be quite suited to the occasion," broke in Louise; "and--"

"And wear our lives out with innumerable fittings," concluded Beth, gloomily.

"But why new dresses?" demanded the Major. "You've plenty of old ones that are clean and pretty, I'm sure; and our Patsy had one from the dressmaker only last week that's fit for a queen."

"Oh, Daddy! you don't understand," laughed Patsy.

"This time, Major, I fear you don't," agreed Beth. "Your convictions regarding society may be admirable, but you're weak on the gown question."

"If the women would only listen to me," began the Major, dictatorially; but Uncle John cut him short.

"They won't, sir; they'll listen to no man when it comes to dressmaking."

"Don't they dress to captivate the men, then?" asked the Major, with fine sarcasm.

"Not at all," answered Louise, loftily. "Men seldom know what a woman has on, if she looks nice; but women take in every detail of dress and criticise it severely if anything happens to be out of date, ill fitting or in bad taste."

"Then they're in bad taste themselves!" retorted the Major, hotly.

"Tut-tut, sir; who are you to criticise woman's ways?" asked Uncle John, much amused. The Major was silenced, but he glared as if unconvinced.

"Dressmaking is a nuisance," remarked Beth, placidly; "but it's the penalty we pay for being women."

"You're nothing but slips o' girls, not out of your teens," grumbled the Major. And no one paid any attention to him.

"We want to do you credit, Uncle John," said Patsy, brightly. "Perhaps our names will be in the papers."

"They're there already," announced Mr. Merrick, picking up the Sunday paper that lay beside him.

A chorus of exclamations was followed by a dive for the paper, and even the Major smiled grimly as he observed the three girlish heads close together and three pair of eager eyes scanning swiftly the society columns.

"Here it is!" cried Patsy, dancing up and down like a school-girl; and Louise read in a dignified voice--which trembled slightly with excitement and pleasure--the following item:

"Miss Von Taer will receive next Thursday evening at the family mansion in honor of Miss Merrick, Miss Doyle and Miss De Graf. These three charming debutantes are nieces of John Merrick, the famous tin-plate magnate."

"Phoo!" growled the Major, during the impressive hush that followed; "that's it, exactly. Your names are printed because you're John

Merrick's nieces. If it hadn't been for tin-plate, my dears, society never would 'a' known ye at all, at all!"