

CHAPTER VI

THE FLY IN THE BROTH

Diana was an experienced entertainer and under her skillful supervision the reception proved eminently successful. Nor had she cause to be ashamed of the three protégées she presented to society, since capable modistes had supplemented their girlish charms and freshness with costumes pertinent to the occasion. Perhaps Patsy's chubby form looked a little "dumpish" in her party gown, for some of Diana's female guests regarded her with quiet amusement and bored tolerance, while the same critical posse was amazed and envious at Beth's superb beauty and stately bearing. After all, it was Louise who captured the woman contingency and scored the greatest success; for her appearance was not only dainty and attractive but she was so perfectly self-possessed and responsive and bore herself so admirably under the somewhat trying; circumstances of a debut that she won the cordial goodwill of all whom she encountered. The hostess was elaborately gowned in white pompadour satin, trimmed with white chiffon and embroidered in pink roses and pearls. The Von Taer home was handsomely decorated for the occasion, since Diana never did anything by halves and for her own credit insisted on attention to those details of display that society recognizes and loves. Hundreds of long-stemmed American Beauties and Kentia palms were combined in beautifying the spacious hall, while orchids in marvelous variety nodded their blossoms in the great drawing-room, where the

young-ladies received. These rare and precious flowers were arranged in bronze baskets with sprays of maidenhair. In the music room adjoining, great clusters of Madam Chantenay roses embellished the charming scene. Branches of cherry-blossoms, supplied by hot-houses, were banked in the lofty dining-room, where a Japanese pergola made of bamboo and lighted with red lanterns was erected at the upper end. The attendants here were Japanese girls in native costume, and the long table was laid with a lace cloth over pink satin, with butterfly bows of pink tulle. The table itself was decorated with cut-glass baskets of Cecil Brunner roses mingled with lilies of the valley and refreshments were distributed to the standing guests as they entered.

The affair was in the nature of a typical "crush," for Diana's list of eligibles included most of the prominent society folk then in town, and she was too important a personage to have her invitations disregarded. Beth and Patsy were fairly bewildered by the numerous introductions, until names became meaningless in their ears; but Louise, perfectly composed and in no wise distracted by her surroundings or the music of the orchestra and the perpetual buzz of conversation in the crowded rooms, impressed each individual upon her memory clearly, and was not likely to blunder in regard to names or individuality in the future. This is a rare talent, indeed, and scores, largely in one's favor; for no one likes to think himself so unimportant as to be forgotten, under any circumstances.

It was during the thick of the reception that one of Miss Von Taer's

intimates, a graceful blond girl, suddenly seized her arm and whispered: "Oh, Diana! Guess who's here--guess, my dear!" Diana knew. Her eyes, always narrowed until the lashes shielded their sharp watchfulness, seldom missed observing anything of importance. She pressed her friend's hand and turned again to the line of guests, while Louise, who had overheard the excited whisper, wondered casually what it might mean.

Soon after she knew. A tall, handsome young fellow was bowing before Diana, who--wonder of wonders!--for an instant unclosed her great eyes and shot an electric glance into his smiling face. The glance was brief as unexpected, yet it must have told the young man something, for he flushed and bowed again as if to hide his embarrassment. It also told Louise something, and her heart, which had given a quick bound at sight of the man's face, began to cry out against Diana Von Taer's artifices.

"Mr. Arthur Weldon," said the hostess, in her soft voice; and now, as the young man turned an eager gaze on Louise and half extended his hand, the girl's face grew pale and she imitated Diana to the extent of dropping her eyes and bowing with frigid indifference. Standing close he whispered "Louise!" in a pleading tone that made Diana frown wickedly. But the girl was unresponsive and another instant forced him to turn to Beth.

"Why, Arthur! are you here, then?" said the girl, in a surprised but cordial tone.

"That is not astonishing, Miss Beth," he replied. "The puzzling fact is that you are here--and under such auspices," he added, in a lower tone.

Patsy now claimed him, with a frank greeting, and Arthur Weldon could do little more than press her hand when the line forced him to move on and give place to others.

But this especial young fellow occupied the minds of all four girls long after the crowd had swallowed him up. Diana was uneasy and obviously disturbed by the discovery that he was known to the three cousins, as well as by the memory of his tone as he addressed Louise Merrick. Louise, who had read Diana's quick glance with the accuracy of an intuitionist, felt a sudden suspicion and dislike for Diana now dominating her. Behind all this was a mystery, which shall be explained here because the reader deserves to be more enlightened than the characters themselves.

Arthur Weldon's nature was a queer combination of weakness and strength. He was physically brave but a moral coward. The motherless son of a man wholly immersed in business, he had been much neglected in his youth and his unstable character was largely the result of this neglect. On leaving college he refused a business career planned for him by his father, who cast him off with scornful indifference, and save for a slim temporary allowance promised to disinherit him. It was during this period that Arthur met Louise and fell desperately in love with her. The

girl appeared to return the young fellow's devotion, but shrewd, worldly Mrs. Merrick, discovering that the boy was practically disinherited and had no prospects whatever, forbade him the house. Louise, until now but mildly interested in the young-man, resented her mother's interference and refused to give him up. She found ways to meet Arthur Weldon outside her home, so that the situation had become complicated and dangerous when Uncle John seized his three nieces and whisked them off to Europe. Young Weldon, under an assumed name, followed and attached himself to the party; but John Merrick's suspicions were presently aroused and on discovering the identity of the youth he forbade him or Louise to "make love" or even speak of such a thing during the remainder of the trip.

The young fellow, by many acts on some occasions and grave weaknesses on others, won Uncle John's kindly interest. The old gentleman knew human nature, and saw much to admire as well as condemn in Louise's friend. Beth and Patsy found him a pleasant comrade, and after all love-making was tabooed they were quite a harmonious party. Finally the sudden death of Weldon's father left him the possessor of a fortune. He returned to America to look after his newly-acquired business and became so immersed in it that Louise felt herself neglected when she came home expecting him to dance attendance upon her as before. She treated him coldly and he ceased calling, his volatile and sensitive nature resenting such treatment. It is curious what little things influence the trend of human lives. Many estrangements are caused by trifles so intangible that we can scarcely locate them at all.

At first the girl was very unhappy at the alienation, but soon schooled herself to forget her former admirer. Arthur Weldon, for his part, consoled himself by plunging into social distractions and devoting himself to Diana Von Taer, whose strange personality for a time fascinated him.

The business could not hold young Weldon's vacillant temperament for long; neither could Diana. As a matter of fact his heart, more staunch than he himself suspected, had never wavered much from Louise. Yet pride forbade his attempting to renew their former relations. It was now some months since he had seen the girl, and his eager exclamation was wrested from him by surprise and a sudden awakening to the fact that his love for her had merely slumbered.

Diana, worldly, cold and calculating as was her nature, had been profoundly touched by Arthur's devotion to her. Usually young men were soon repulsed by her unfortunate personality, which was not easily understood. Therefore her intense nature responded freely to this admirer's attentions, and if Diana could really love she loved Arthur Weldon. He had never proposed to her or even intimated it was his intention to do so, but she conceived a powerful desire to win him and had never abandoned this motive when he grew cold and appeared to desert her. Just now he was recently back from Italy, where he had passed several months, and Diana's reception was his first reappearance in society. The girl had planned to bring him to her side this evening and intended to exert her strongest fascinations to lure him back to his

former allegiance; so her annoyance may be guessed when she found her three protégées seemingly more familiar with the young man than was she herself.

At last the line ended and the introductions were complete. The debutantes were at once the center of interested groups composed of those who felt it a duty or pleasure to show them attention. Diana wandered to the music room and waylaid Arthur Weldon, who was just about to make his escape from the house, having decided it was impossible to find an opportunity to converse with Louise that evening.

"I'm so glad you came, Arthur," she said, a quick glance assuring her they were not overheard. "You landed from the steamer but yesterday, I hear."

"And came straightway to pay my respects to my old friend," he answered lightly. "Isn't it unusual for you to present debutantes, Diana?"

"You know these girls, don't you, Arthur?"

"Yes; I met them in Europe."

"And flirted with Miss Merrick? Be honest, Arthur, I know your secret."

"Do you? Then you know we were merely good friends," said he, annoyed at

her accusation.

"Of course. You called her 'Louise,' didn't you?"

"To be sure. And Patsy called me 'Arthur. You may have heard her."

"Patsy?"

"That's Miss Patricia Doyle--our dear little Patsy."

"Oh. I'm sure you didn't fall in love with her, at any rate."

"I'm not so sure. Everybody loves Patsy. But I had no time for love-making. I was doing Europe."

"Wasn't that a year or so ago?" she asked, realizing he was trying to evade further reference to Louise.

"Yes."

"And since then?"

"I've been away the last six or seven months, as you know, on my second trip abroad."

"But before that--when you first returned?"

"If I remember rightly I was then much in the society of Miss Von Taer. Is the catechism ended at last?"

"Yes," she replied, laughing. "Don't think me inquisitive, Arthur; I was surprised to find you knew these girls, with whom I am myself but lightly acquainted."

"Yet you introduce them to your very select set?"

"To please my father, who wishes to please Mr. Merrick."

"I understand," said he, nodding. "But they're nice girls, Diana. You're not running chances, I assure you."

"That relieves me," she replied rather scornfully. "If Arthur Weldon will vouch for them--"

"But I don't. I'll vouch for no one--not even myself," he declared hastily. She was calmly reading his face, and did not seem to approve the text.

"Are you as fickle as ever, then, mon cher?" she asked, softly.

"I'm not fickle, Diana. My fault is that I'm never serious."

"Never?"

"I cannot remember ever being serious; at least, where a girl was concerned."

Diana bit her lips to restrain a frown, but her eyes, which he was avoiding, flashed wickedly.

"That is surely a fault, my Arthur," was her tender reply. "Were you never serious during our quiet evenings together; our dances, theatre parties and romps?"

"That was merely fun. And you, Diana?"

"Oh, I enjoyed the fun, too. It meant so much to me. I began to live, then, and found life very sweet. But when you suddenly left me and went abroad--ah, that was indeed serious."

Her tone was full of passionate yearning. He laughed, trying to appear at ease. Some sort of an understanding must be had with Diana sooner or later, and she might as well realize at this present interview that the old relations could not be restored. His nature was not brutal and he disliked to hurt her; moreover, the boy had an uneasy feeling that he had been a far more ardent admirer of this peculiar girl than any fellow should be who had had no serious intentions; yet it would be folly to allow Diana to think she could win him back to his former allegiance. No

compromising word had ever left his lips; he had never spoken of love to her. Yet the girl's attitude seemed to infer a certain possession of him which was far from agreeable.

Having gone so far, he should have said more; but here again his lack of moral courage proved his stumbling-block, and he weakly evaded a frank expression of his true feelings. "Life," he began somewhat haltingly, to break the embarrassing pause, "is only serious when we make it so; and as soon as we make it serious it makes us unhappy. So I've adopted one invariable rule: to laugh and be gay."

"Then I too will be gay, and together we'll enjoy life," responded Diana, with an effort to speak lightly. "I shall let your moods be my moods, Arthur, as a good friend should. Are we not affinities?"

Again he knew not what to say. Her persistence in clinging to her intangible hold upon him was extremely irritating, and he realized the girl was far too clever for him to cope with and was liable to cause him future trouble. Instead of seizing the opportunity to frankly undeceive her he foolishly evaded the subject.

"You've been tempting fate to-night," he remarked with assumed carelessness. "Don't you remember that to stand four girls in a row is a bad omen?"

"Only for the one who first winks. Isn't that the way the saying goes? I

seldom wink, myself," she continued, smilingly. "But I have no faith in ill omens. Their power is entirely due to mental fear."

"I think not," said Arthur, glad the conversation had taken this turn. "Once I knew a fellow with thirteen letters in his name. He had no mental fear. But he proposed to a girl--and was accepted."

She gave him one of those sudden, swift glances that were so disconcerting.

"If you had a middle initial, there would be thirteen letters in your own name, Arthur Weldon."

"But I haven't, Diana; I haven't," he protested, eagerly. "And if ever I propose to a girl I'm sure she'll refuse me. But I've no intention of doing such a crazy thing, so I'm perfectly safe."

"You cannot be sure until you try, Arthur," she replied pointedly, and with a start he became conscious that he was again treading upon dangerous ground.

"Come; let us rejoin your guests," said he, offering her his arm. "They would all hate me if they knew I was keeping the fair Diana from them so long." "Arthur, I must have a good long; talk with you--one of our old, delightful confabs," she said, earnestly. "Will you call Sunday afternoon? Then we shall be quite undisturbed."

He hesitated.

"Sunday afternoon?" he answered.

"Yes."

"All right; I'll come, Diana."

She gave him a grateful look and taking his arm allowed him to lead her back to the drawing-room. The crush was over, many having already departed. Some of the young people were dancing in the open spaces to the music of a string orchestra hidden behind a bank of ferns in the hall.

Louise and Beth were the centers of attentive circles; Patsy conversed with merry freedom with a group of ancient dowagers, who delighted in her freshness and healthy vigor and were flattered by her consideration. Mrs. Merrick--for she had been invited--sat in a corner gorgeously robed and stiff as a poker, her eyes devouring the scene. Noting the triumph of Louise she failed to realize she was herself neglected. A single glance sufficed to acquaint Diana with all this, and after a gracious word to her guests here and there she asked Arthur to dance with her. He could not well refuse, but felt irritated and annoyed when he observed Louise's eyes fastened upon him in amused disdain. After a few turns he discovered some departing ones waiting to bid their hostess adieu, and

escaped from his unpleasant predicament by halting his partner before them. Then he slipped away and quietly left the house before Diana had time to miss him.