

## CHAPTER VII

### THE HERO ENTERS AND TROUBLE BEGINS

The Von Taer reception fully launched the three nieces in society. Endorsed by Diana and backed by John Merrick's millions and their own winsome charms, they were sure to become favorites in that admirable set to which they had fortunately gained admittance.

Cards poured in upon them during the succeeding days and they found themselves busy returning calls and attending dinners, fetes, bridge parties and similar diversions. The great Mrs. Sandringham took a decided fancy to Louise, and when the committee was appointed to arrange for the social Kermess to be held in December, this dictatorial leader had the girl's name included in the list. Naturally the favor led to all three cousins taking active part in the most famous social event of the season, and as an especial mark of favoritism they were appointed to conduct the "flower booth," one of the important features of the Kermess.

Mrs. Merrick was in the seventh heaven of ecstatic delight; Uncle John declared his three girls were sure to become shining lights, if not actual constellations, wherever they might be placed; Major Doyle growled and protested; but was secretly pleased to have "our Patsy the captain of the dress parade," where he fondly imagined she outclassed

all others. All former denunciations of society at large were now ignored, even by unimpressive Beth, and the girls soon became deeply interested in their novel experiences.

Arthur Weldon sulked at home, unhappy and undecided, for a day or two after the reception. Sunday noon he dispatched a messenger to Diana with a note saying he would be unable to keep his appointment with her that afternoon. Then he went straight to the Merrick home and sent his card to Louise. The girl flushed, smiled, frowned, and decided to go down.

No one had ever interested her so much as Arthur Weldon. There had been a spice of romance about their former relations that made her still regard him as exceptional among mankind. She had been asking herself, since the night of the reception, if she still loved him, but could not come to a positive conclusion. The boy was no longer "ineligible," as he had been at first; even Uncle John could now have no serious objection to him. He was handsome, agreeable, occupied a good social position and was fairly well off in the way of worldly goods--the last point removing Mrs. Merrick's former rejection of Arthur as a desirable son-in-law.

But girls are wayward and peculiar in such an affaire du coeur, and none of these things might have weighed with Louise had she not discovered that Diana Von Taer was in love with Arthur and intended to win him. That aroused the girl's fighting instincts, rendered the young man doubly important, and easily caused Louise to forget her resentment at his temporary desertion of her. Perhaps, she reflected, it had

partially been her own fault. Now that Arthur showed a disposition to renew their friendship, and she might promise herself the satisfaction of defeating Diana's ambitions, it would be diplomatic, at least, to receive the youth with cordial frankness.

Therefore she greeted him smilingly and with outstretched hand, saying:

"This is quite a surprise, Mr. Weldon. I'd a notion you had forgotten me." "No, indeed, Louise! How could you imagine such a thing?" he answered, reproachfully.

"There was some evidence of the fact," she asserted archly. "At one time you gave me no peace; then you became retiring. At last you disappeared wholly. What could I think, sir, under such circumstances?"

He stood looking down at her thoughtfully. How pretty she had grown; and how mature and womanly.

"Louise," said he, gently, "don't let us indulge in mutual reproaches. Some one must have been at fault and I'll willingly take all the blame if you will forgive me. Once we were--were good friends. We--we intended to be still more to one another, Louise, but something occurred, I don't know what, to--to separate us."

"Why, you went away," said the girl, laughing; "and that of course separated us."

"You treated me like a beggar; don't forget that part of it, dear. Of course I went away."

"And consoled yourself with a certain Miss Diana Von Taer. It has lately been rumored you are engaged to her." "Me? What nonsense?" But he hushed guiltily, and Louise noted everything and determined he should not escape punishment.

"Diana, at least, is in earnest," she remarked, with assumed indifference. "You may not care to deny that you have been very attentive to her."

"Not especially so," he declared, stoutly.

"People gossip, you know. And Diana is charming."

"She's an iceberg!"

"Oh, you have discovered that? Was she wholly unresponsive, then?"

"No," he said, with a touch of anger. "I have never cared for Diana, except in a friendly way. She amused me for a while when--when I was wretched. But I never made love to her; not for a moment. Afterward, why--then----"

"Well; what then?" as he hesitated, growing red again.

"I found she had taken my careless attentions in earnest, and the play was getting dangerous. So I went abroad."

Louise considered this explanation seriously. She believed he was speaking the truth, so far as he knew. But at the same time she realized from her own experience that Arthur might as easily deceive himself as Diana in his estimate as to the warmth of the devotion he displayed. His nature was impetuous and ardent. That Diana should have taken his attentions seriously and become infatuated with the handsome young fellow was not a matter to cause surprise.

Gradually Louise felt her resentment disappearing. In Arthur's presence the charm of his personality influenced her to be lenient with his shortcomings. And his evident desire for a reconciliation found an echo in her own heart.

Mutual explanations are excellent to clear a murky atmosphere, and an hour's earnest conversation did much to restore these two congenial spirits to their former affectionate relations. Of course Louise did not succumb too fully to his pleadings, for her feminine instinct warned her to keep the boy on "the anxious seat" long enough to enable him to appreciate her value and the honor of winning her good graces. Moreover, she made some severe conditions and put him on his good behavior. If he proved worthy, and was steadfast and true, why then the future might

reward him freely.

Diana had been making careful plans for her interview with Arthur that Sunday afternoon. With no futile attempt to deceive herself as to existent conditions she coldly weighed the chances in her mental scale and concluded she had sufficient power to win this unstable youth to her side and induce him to forget that such a person as Louise Merrick ever existed.

Diana was little experienced in such affairs, it is true. Arthur Weldon had been her first and only declared admirer, and no one living had studied his peculiar nature more critically than this observant girl. Also she knew well her own physical failings. She realized that her personality was to many repulsive, rather than attractive, and this in spite of her exquisite form, her perfect breeding and many undeniable accomplishments. Men, as a rule, seldom remained at her side save through politeness, and even seemed to fear her; but never until now had she cared for any man sufficiently to wish to retain or interest him. There were unsuspected fascinations lying dormant in her nature, and Miss Von Taer calmly reflected that the exercise of these qualities, backed by her native wit and capacity for intrigue, could easily accomplish the object she desired.

Thus she had planned her campaign and carefully dressed herself in anticipation of Arthur's call when his note came canceling the engagement. After rereading his lame excuse she sat down in a quiet

corner and began to think. The first gun had been fired, the battle was on, and like a wise general she carefully marshaled her forces for combat.

An hour or two later she turned to her telephone book and called up the Merrick establishment. A voice, that of a maid, evidently, answered her.

"I wish to speak with Miss Merrick," said Diana.

Louise, annoyed at being disturbed, left Arthur's side to respond to the call.

"Who is it, please?" she asked.

"Is Mr. Weldon still there, or has he gone?" enquired Diana, disguising her voice and speaking imperatively.. "Why, he's still here," answered bewildered Louise; "but who is talking, please?"

No answer.

"Do you wish to speak with Mr. Weldon?" continued the girl, mystified at such an odd procedure.

Diana hung up her receiver, severing the connection. The click of the instrument assured Louise there was no use in waiting longer, so she returned to Arthur. She could not even guess who had called her. Arthur

could, though, when he had heard her story, and Diana's impudent meddling made him distinctly uneasy. He took care not to enlighten Louise, and the incident was soon forgotten by her.

"It proved just as I expected," mused Diana, huddled in her reclining chair. "The fool has thrown me over to go to her. But this is not important. With the situation so clearly defined I shall know exactly what I must do to protect my own interests."

Mr. Von Taer was away from home that Sunday afternoon, and would not return until a late hour. Diana went to the telephone again and after several unsuccessful attempts located her cousin, Mr. Charles Connoldy Mershone, at a club.

"It's Diana," she said, when at last communication was established. "I want you to come over and see me; at once."

"You'll have to excuse me, Di," was the answer. "I was unceremoniously kicked out the last time, you know."

"Father's away. It's all right, Charlie. Come along."

"Can't see it, my fair cousin. You've all treated me like a bull-pup, and I'm not anxious to mix up with that sort of a relationship. Anything more? I'm going to play pool to win my dinner."



"Funds running low, Charlie?"

"Worse than that; they're invisible."

"Then pay attention. Call a taxi at once, and get here as soon as you can. I'll foot the bill--and any others that happen to be bothering you."

A low, surprised whistle came over the wire.

"What's up, Di?" he asked, with new interest.

"Come and find out."

"Can I be useful?"

"Assuredly; to yourself."

"All right; I'm on the way."

He hung up, and Diana gave a sigh of content as she slowly returned to her den and the easy chair, where Mr. Mershone found her "coiled" some half hour later.

"This is a queer go," said the young man, taking a seat and glancing around with knitted brows. "It isn't so long since dear Uncle Hedrik

tumbled me out of here neck and crop; and now Cousin Diana invites me to return."

At first glance young Mershone seemed an attractive young fellow, tall, finely formed and well groomed. But his eyes were too close together and his handsome features bore unmistakable marks of dissipation.

"You disgraced us a year or so ago, Charlie," said Diana, in her soft, quiet accents, "and under such circumstances we could not tolerate you. You can scarcely blame us for cutting your acquaintance. But now--"

"Well, now?" he enquired coolly, trying to read her impassive face.

"I need the services of just such an unscrupulous and clever individual as you have proven yourself to be. I'm willing to pay liberally for those services, and you doubtless need the money. Are we allies, then?"

Mershone laughed, with little genuine mirth.

"Of course, my dear cousin," he responded; "provided you propose any legal villainy. I'm not partial to the police; but I really need the money, as you suggest."

"And you will be faithful?" she asked, regarding him doubtfully.

"To the cause, you may be sure. But understand me: I balk at murder and

burglary. Somehow, the police seem to know me. I'll not do anything that might lead to a jail sentence, because there are easier ways to get money. However, I don't imagine your proposed plan is very desperate, Diana; it's more liable to be dirty work. Never mind; you may command me, my dear cousin--if the pay is ample."

"The pay will be ample if you succeed," she began.

"I don't like that. I may not succeed."

"Listen to me, Charlie. Do you know Arthur Weldon?"

"Slightly; not very well."

"I intend to marry him. He has paid me marked attentions in the past; but now--he--"

"Wants to slip the leash. Quite natural, my dear."

"He has become infatuated with another girl; a light-headed, inexperienced little thing who is likely to marry the first man who asks her. She is very rich--in her own right, too--and her husband will be a fortunate man."

Mershone stared at her. Then he whistled, took a few turns up and down the room, and reseated himself.

"Evidently!" he ejaculated, lighting a cigarette without permission and then leaning back thoughtfully in his chair.

"Charlie," continued Diana, "you may as well marry Louise Merrick and settle down to a life of respectability. You've a dashing, masterful way which no girl of her sort can long resist. I propose that you make desperate love to Louise Merrick and so cut Arthur Weldon out of the deal entirely. My part of the comedy will be to attract him to my side again. Now you have the entire proposition in a nutshell."

He smoked for a time in reflective silence.

"What's the girl like?" he enquired, presently. "Is she attractive?"

"Sufficiently so to fascinate Arthur Weldon. Moreover, she has just been introduced in our set, and knows nothing of your shady past history. Even if rumors came to her ears, young creatures of her sort often find a subtle charm in a man accused of being 'naughty.'"

"Humph!"

"If you win her, you get a wife easily managed and a splendid fortune to squander as you please."

"Sounds interesting, Di, doesn't it? But--"

"In regard to preliminary expenses," she interrupted, calmly, "I have said that your reward will be ample when you have won the game. But meantime I am willing to invest the necessary funds in the enterprise. I will allow you a thousand a month." "Bah! that's nothing at all!" said he, contemptuously, as he flicked the ashes from his cigarette.

"What do you demand, then?"

"Five hundred a week, in advance. It's an expensive job, Di."

"Very well; I will give you five hundred a week; but only as long as you work earnestly to carry out the plot. I shall watch you, Charlie. And you must not lose sight of the ultimate reward."

"I won't, my sweet cousin. It's a bargain," he said, readily enough.

"When do I begin, and what's the program?"

"Draw your chair nearer," said Diana, restraining her triumphant joy.

"I'll explain everything to you in detail. It will be my part to plan, and yours to execute."

"Good!" he exclaimed, with a cheerful grin. "I feel like an executioner already!"