

CHAPTER VIII

OPENING THE CAMPAIGN

Louise's little romance, which now began to thrive vigorously, was regarded with calmness by her cousins and her mother, who knew of the former episode between her and Arthur and attached little importance to the renewed flirtation in which they indulged. That they were deceived in their estimate was due to the girl's reputation for frivolity where young men were concerned. She had been dubbed a "flirt" ever since she first began to wear long dresses, and her nature was not considered deep enough for her heart to be ever seriously affected. Therefore the young girl was gravely misjudged.

Louise was not one to bare her heart, even to her most intimate friends, and no one now suspected that at last her deepest, truest womanly affections were seriously involved. The love for Arthur that had lain dormant in her heart was aroused at a time when she was more mature and capable of recognizing truly her feelings, so that it was not long before she surrendered her reserve and admitted to him that life would mean little for her unless they might pass the years together. For his part, young Weldon sincerely loved Louise, and had never wavered from his firm devotion during all the past months of misunderstanding.

The general impression that they were "merely flirting" afforded the

lovers ample opportunity to have their walks and drives together undisturbed, and during these soulful communions they arrived at such a perfect understanding that both were confident nothing could ever disturb their trust and confidence.

It was at a theatre party that the three debutantes first met Charlie Mershone, but they saw little of him that first evening and scarcely noticed his presence. Louise, indeed, noted that his eyes were fixed upon her more than once with thinly veiled admiration, and without a thought of disloyalty to Arthur, but acting upon the impulse of her coquettish nature, she responded with a demure smile of encouragement. Charlie Mershone was an adept at playing parts. He at first regarded Louise much as a hunter does the game he is stalking. Patsy Doyle was more jolly and Beth De Graf more beautiful than Miss Merrick; but the young man would in any event have preferred the latter's dainty personality. When he found her responsive to his admiring glances he was astounded to note his heart beating rapidly--a thing quite foreign to his usual temperament. Yes, this girl would do very nicely, both as a wife and as a banker. Assuredly the game was well worth playing, as Diana had asserted. He must make it his business to discover what difficulties must be overcome in winning her. Of course Arthur Weldon was the main stumbling-block; but Weldon was a ninny; he must be thrust aside; Diana had promised to attend to that.

Never in his life had Charles Connoldy Mershone been in earnest before. After his first interview with Louise Merrick he became in deadly

earnest. His second meeting with her was at Marie Delmar's bridge whist party, where they had opportunity for an extended conversation. Arthur was present this evening, but by some chance Mershone drew Louise for his partner at cards, and being a skillful player he carried her in progression from table to table, leaving poor Arthur far behind and indulging in merry repartee and mild flirtation until they felt they were quite well acquainted.

Louise found the young man a charming conversationalist. He had a dashing, confidential way of addressing the girl which impressed her as flattering and agreeable, while his spirits were so exuberant and sparkling with humor that she was thoroughly amused every moment while in his society. Indeed, Mr. Mershone was really talented, and had he possessed any manly attributes, or even the ordinary honorable instincts of mankind, there is little doubt he would have been a popular favorite. But he had made his mark, and it was a rather grimy one. From earliest youth he had been guilty of discreditable acts that had won for him the contempt of all right-minded people. That he was still accepted with lax tolerance by some of the more thoughtless matrons of the fashionable set was due to his family name. They could not forget that in spite of his numerous lapses from respectability he was still a Mershone. Not one of the careless mothers who admitted him to her house would have allowed her daughter to wed him, and the degree of tolerance extended to him was fully appreciated by Mershone himself. He knew he was practically barred from the most desirable circles and seldom imposed himself upon his former acquaintances; but now, with a distinct object in view, he

callously disregarded the doubtful looks he encountered and showed himself in every drawing-room where he could secure an invitation or impudently intrude himself. He made frank avowals that he had "reformed" and abandoned his evil ways forever. Some there were who accepted this statement seriously, and Diana furthered his cause by treating him graciously whenever they met, whereas she had formerly refused to recognize her cousin.

Louise knew nothing at all of Charlie Mershone's history and permitted him to call when he eagerly requested the favor; but on the way home from the Delmars Arthur, who had glowered at the usurper all the evening, took pains to hint to Louise that Mershone was an undesirable acquaintance and had a bad record. Of course she laughed at him and teased him, thinking he was jealous and rejoicing that in Mershone she had a tool to "keep Arthur toeing the mark." As a matter of truth she had really missed her lover's companionship that evening, but forbore to apprise him of the fact.

And now the great Kermess began to occupy the minds of the three cousins, who were to share the important "Flower Booth" between them. The Kermess was to be the holiday sensation of the season and bade fair to eclipse the horse show in popularity. It was primarily a charitable entertainment, as the net receipts were to be divided among several deserving hospitals; nevertheless it was classed as a high society function and only the elect were to take active part in the affair.

The ball room at the Waldorf had been secured and many splendid booths were to be erected for the sale of novelties, notions and refreshments. There were to be lotteries and auctions, national dances given by groups of society belles, and other novel entertainments calculated to empty the pockets of the unwary.

Beth was somewhat indignant to find that she and her cousins, having been assigned to the flower booth, were expected to erect a pavilion and decorate it at their own expense, as well as to provide the stock of flowers to be sold. "There is no fund for preliminary expenses, you know," remarked Mrs. Sandringham, "and of course all the receipts are to go to charity; so there is nothing to do but stand these little bills ourselves. We all do it willingly. The papers make a good deal of the Kermess, and the advertisement we get is worth all it costs us."

Beth did not see the force of this argument. She thought it was dreadful for society--really good society--to wish to advertise itself; but gradually she was learning that this was merely a part of the game. To be talked about, to have her goings and comings heralded in the society columns and her gowns described on every possible occasion, seemed the desire of every society woman, and she who could show the biggest scrap-book of clippings was considered of highest importance.. Uncle John laughed joyously when told that the expenses of the flower booth would fall on the shoulders of his girls and there was no later recompense.

"Why not?" he cried. "Mustn't we pay the fiddler if we dance?"

"It's a hold-up game," declared Beth, angrily. "I'll have nothing to do with it."

"Yes, you will, my dear," replied her uncle; "and to avoid separating you chicks from your pin-money I'm going to stand every cent of the expense myself. Why, it's for charity, isn't it? Charity covers a multitude of sins, and I'm just a miserable sinner that needs a bath-robe to snuggle in. How can the poor be better served than by robbing the rich? Go ahead, girls, and rig up the swellest booth that money will build. I'll furnish as many flowers as you can sell, and Charity ought to get a neat little nest-egg out of the deal."

"That's nice of you," said Patsy, kissing him; "but it's an imposition, all the same."

"It's a blessing, my dear. It will help a bit to ease off that dreadful income that threatens to crush me," he rejoined, smiling at them. And the nieces made no further protest, well knowing the kindly old gentleman would derive untold pleasure in carrying out his generous plans.

The flower booth, designed by a famous architect, proved a splendid and most imposing structure. It was capped by a monster bouquet of artificial orchids in papier-maché, which reached twenty feet into the

air. The three cousins had their gowns especially designed for the occasion. Beth represented a lily, Louise a Gold-of-Ophir rose, and Patricia a pansy.

The big ball room had been turned over to the society people several days in advance, that the elaborate preparations might be completed in time, and during this period groups of busy, energetic young folks gathered by day and in the evenings, decorating, flirting, rehearsing the fancy dances, and amusing themselves generally.

Arthur Weldon was there to assist Uncle John's nieces; but his pleasure was somewhat marred by the persistent presence of Charlie Mershone, who, having called once or twice upon Louise, felt at liberty to attach himself to her party. The ferocious looks of his rival were ignored by this designing young man and he had no hesitation in interrupting a tête-à-tête to monopolize the girl for himself.

Louise was amused, thinking it fun to worry Arthur by flirting mildly with Mr. Mershone, for whom she cared not a jot. Both Patsy and Beth took occasion to remonstrate with her for this folly, for having known Weldon for a long time and journeyed with him through a part of Europe, they naturally espoused his cause, liking him as much as they intuitively disliked Mershone.

One evening Arthur, his patience well-nigh exhausted, talked seriously with Louise.

"This fellow Mershone," said he, "is a bad egg, a despicable son of a decadent family. His mother was Hedrik Von Taer's sister, but the poor thing has been dead many years. Not long ago Charlie was tabooed by even the rather fast set he belonged to, and the Von Taers, especially, refused to recognize their relative. Now he seems to go everywhere again. I don't know what has caused the change, I'm sure." "Why, he has reformed," declared Louise; "Diana told me so. She said he had been a bit wild, as all young men are; but now his behavior is irreproachable."

"I don't believe a word of it," insisted Arthur. "Mershone is a natural cad; he's been guilty of all sorts of dirty tricks, and is capable of many more. If you'll watch out, Louise, you'll see that all the girls are shy of being found in his society, and all the chaperons cluck to their fledglings the moment the hawk appears. You're a novice in society just yet, my dear, and it won't do you any good to encourage Charlie Mershone, whom everyone else avoids."

"He's very nice," returned Louise, lightly.

"Yes; he must be nicer than I am," admitted the young man, glumly, and thereupon he became silent and morose and Louise found her evening spoiled.

The warning did not fall on barren ground, however. In the seclusion of

her own room the girl thought it all over and decided she had teased her true lover enough. Arthur had not scolded or reproached her, despite his annoyance, and she had a feeling that his judgment of Charlie Mershone was quite right. Although the latter was evidently madly in love with her the girl had the discretion to see how selfish and unrestrained was his nature, and once or twice he had already frightened her by his impetuosity. She decided to retreat cautiously but positively from further association with him, and at once began to show the young man coolness.

Mershone must have been chagrined, but he did not allow Louise to see there was any change in their relations as far as he was concerned. He merely redoubled his attentions, sending her flowers and bonbons daily, accompanied by ardently worded but respectful notes. Really, Louise was in a quandary, and she frankly admitted to Arthur that she had brought this embarrassment upon herself. Yet Arthur could do or say little to comfort her. He longed secretly to "punch Mershone's head," but could find no occasion for such decided action.

Diana, during this time, treated both Arthur and Louise with marked cordiality. Believing her time would come to take part in the comedy she refrained from interfering prematurely with the progress of events. She managed to meet her accomplice at frequent intervals and was pleased that there was no necessity to urge Charlie to do his utmost in separating the lovers.

"I'm bound to win, Di," he said grimly, "for I love the girl even better than I do her fortune. And of one thing you may rest assured; Weldon shall never marry her."

"What will you do?" asked Diana, curiously.

"Anything! Everything that is necessary to accomplish my purpose."

"Be careful," said she warningly. "Keep a cool head, Charlie, and don't do anything foolish. Still--"

"Well?"

"If it is necessary to take a few chances, do it. Arthur Weldon must not marry Louise Merrick!"