

CHAPTER IX

THE VON TAER PEARLS

Uncle John really had more fun out of the famous Kermess than anyone else. The preparations gave him something to do, and he enjoyed doing--openly, as well as in secret ways. Having declared that he would stock the flower booth at his own expense, he confided to no one his plans. The girls may have thought he would merely leave orders with a florist; but that was not the Merrick way of doing things. Instead, he visited the most famous greenhouses within a radius of many miles, contracting for all the floral blooms that art and skill could produce. The Kermess was to be a three days' affair, and each day the floral treasures of the cast were delivered in reckless profusion at the flower booth, which thus became the center of attraction and the marvel of the public. The girls were delighted to be able to dispense such blooms, and their success as saleswomen was assured at once. Of course the fair vendors were ignorant of the value of their wares, for Uncle John refused to tell them how extravagant he had been; so they were obliged to guess at the sums to be demanded and in consequence sold priceless orchids and rare hothouse flora at such ridiculous rates that Mr. Merrick chuckled with amusement until he nearly choked.

The public being "cordially invited" Uncle John was present on that first important evening, and--wonder of wonders--was arrayed in an

immaculate full-dress suit that fitted his chubby form like the skin of a banana. Mayor Doyle, likewise disguised, locked arms with his brother-in-law and stalked gravely among the throng; but neither ever got to a point in the big room where the flower booth was not in plain sight. The Major's pride in "our Patsy" was something superb; Uncle John was proud of all three of his nieces. As the sale of wares was for the benefit of charity these old fellows purchased liberally--mostly flowers and had enough parcels sent home to fill a delivery wagon.

One disagreeable incident, only, marred this otherwise successful evening--successful especially for the three cousins, whose beauty and grace won the hearts of all.

Diana Von Taer was stationed in the "Hindoo Booth," and the oriental costume she wore exactly fitted her sensuous style of beauty. To enhance its effect she had worn around her neck the famous string of Von Taer pearls, a collection said to be unmatched in beauty and unequalled in value in all New York.

The "Hindoo Booth" was near enough to the "Flower Booth" for Diana to watch the cousins, and the triumph of her late protégées was very bitter for her to endure. Especially annoying was it to find Arthur Weldon devoting himself assiduously to Louise, who looked charming in her rose gown and favored Arthur in a marked way, although Charlie Mershone, refusing to be ignored, also leaned over the counter of the booth and chatted continually, striving to draw Miss Merrick's attention

to himself.

Forced to observe all this, Diana soon lost her accustomed coolness. The sight of the happy faces of Arthur and Louise aroused all the rancor and subtle wit that she possessed, and she resolved upon an act that she would not before have believed herself capable of. Leaning down, she released the catch of the famous pearls and unobserved concealed them in a handkerchief. Then, leaving her booth, she sauntered slowly over to the floral display, which was surrounded for the moment by a crowd of eager customers. Many of the vases and pottery jars which had contained flowers now stood empty, and just before the station of Louise Merrick the stock was sadly depleted. This was, of course, offset by the store of money in the little drawer beside the fair sales-lady, and Louise, having greeted Diana with a smile and nod, turned to renew her conversation with the young men besieging her.

Diana leaned gracefully over the counter, resting the hand containing the handkerchief over the mouth of an empty Doulton vase--empty save for the water which had nourished the flowers. At the same time she caught Louise's eye and with a gesture brought the girl to her side. "Those young men are wealthy," she said, carelessly, her head close to that of Louise. "Make them pay well for their purchases, my dear."

"I can't rob them, Diana," was the laughing rejoinder.

"But it is your duty to rob, at a Kermess, and in the interests of

charity," persisted Diana, maintaining her voice at a whisper.

Louise was annoyed.

"Thank you," she said, and went back to the group awaiting her.

The floral booth was triangular, Beth officiated at one of the three sides, Patsy at another, and Louise at the third. Diana now passed softly around the booth, interchanging a word with the other two girls, after which she returned to her own station.

Presently, while chatting with a group of acquaintances, she suddenly clasped her throat and assuming an expression of horror exclaimed:

"My pearls!"

"What, the Von Taer pearls?" cried one.

"The Von Taer pearls," said Diana, as if dazed by her misfortune.

"And you've lost them, dear?"

"They're lost!" she echoed.

Well, there was excitement then, you may be sure. One man hurried to notify the door-keeper and the private detective employed on all such

occasions, while others hastily searched the booth--of course in vain. Diana seemed distracted and the news spread quickly through the assemblage.

"Have you left this booth at all?" asked a quiet voice, that of the official whose business it was to investigate.

"I--I merely walked over to the floral booth opposite, and exchanged a word with Miss Merrick, and the others there," she explained.

The search was resumed, and Charlie Mershone sauntered over.

"What's this, Di? Lost the big pearls, I hear," he said.

She took him aside and whispered something to him. He nodded and returned at once to the flower booth, around which a crowd of searchers now gathered, much to the annoyance of Louise and her cousins.

"It's all foolishness, you know," said Uncle John, to the Major, confidentially. "If the girl really dropped her pearls some one has picked them up, long ago."

Young Mershone seemed searching the floral booth as earnestly as the others, and awkwardly knocked the Doulton vase from the shelf with his elbow. It smashed to fragments and in the pool of water on the floor appeared the missing pearls.

There was an awkward silence for a moment, while all eyes turned curiously upon Louise, who served this side of the triangle. The girl appeared turned to stone as she gazed down at the gems. Mershon laughed disagreeably and picked up the recovered treasure, which Diana ran forward and seized.

"H-m-m!" said the detective, with a shrug; "this is a strange occurrence--a very strange occurrence, indeed. Miss Von Taer, do you wish--"

"No!" exclaimed Diana, haughtily. "I accuse no one. It is enough that an accident has restored to me the heirloom."

Stiffly she marched back to her own booth, and the crowd quietly dispersed, leaving only Arthur, Uncle John and the Major standing to support Louise and her astonished cousins.

"Why, confound it!" cried the little millionaire, with a red face, "does the jade mean to insinuate--"

"Not at all, sor," interrupted the Major, sternly; "her early education has been neglected, that's all."

"Come dear," pleaded Arthur to Louise; "let us go home."

"By no means!" announced Beth, positively; "let us stay where we belong.
Why, we're not half sold out yet!"