

## CHAPTER X

### MISLED

Arthur Weldon met Mershone at a club next afternoon. "You low scoundrell!" he exclaimed. "It was your trick to accuse Miss Merrick of a theft last night."

"Was she accused?" enquired the other, blandly. "I hadn't heard, really."

"You did it yourself!"

"Dear me!" said Mershone, deliberately lighting a cigarette.

"You or your precious cousin--you're both alike," declared Arthur, bitterly. "But you have given us wisdom, Mershone. We'll see you don't trick us again."

The young man stared at him, between puffs of smoke.

"It occurs to me, Weldon, that you're becoming insolent. It won't do, my boy. Unless you guard your tongue--"

"Bah! Resent it, if you dare; you coward."

"Coward?"

"Yes. A man who attacks an innocent girl is a coward. And you've been a coward all your life, Mershone, for one reason or another. No one believes in your pretended reform. But I want to warn you to keep away from Miss Merrick, hereafter, or I'll take a hand in your punishment myself."

For a moment the two eyed one another savagely. They were equally matched in physique; but Arthur was right, there was no fight in Mershone; that is, of the knock-down order. He would fight in his own way, doubtless, and this made him more dangerous than his antagonist supposed.

"What right have you, sir, to speak for Miss Merrick?" he demanded.

"The best right in the world," replied Arthur. "She is my promised wife."

"Indeed! Since when?"

"That is none of your affair, Mershone. As a matter of fact, however, that little excitement you created last night resulted in a perfect understanding between us." "I created!"

"You, of course. Miss Merrick does not care to meet you again. You will do well to avoid her in the future."

"I don't believe you, Weldon. You're bluffing."

"Am I? Then dare to annoy Miss Merrick again and I'll soon convince you of my sincerity."

With this parting shot he walked away, leaving Mershon really at a loss to know whether he was in earnest or not. To solve the question he called a taxicab and in a few minutes gave his card to the Merrick butler with a request to see Miss Louise.

The man returned with a message that Miss Merrick was engaged.

"Please tell her it is important," insisted Mershon.

Again the butler departed, and soon returned.

"Any message for Miss Merrick must be conveyed in writing, sir," he said, "She declines to see you."

Mershon went away white with anger. We may credit him with loving Louise as intensely as a man of his caliber can love anyone. His sudden dismissal astounded him and made him frantic with disappointment. Louise's treatment of the past few days might have warned him, but he

had no intuition of the immediate catastrophe that had overtaken him. It wasn't his self-pride that was injured; that had become so battered there was little of it left; but he had set his whole heart on winning this girl and felt that he could not give her up.

Anger toward Weldon was prominent amongst his emotion. He declared between his set teeth that if Louise was lost to him she should never marry Weldon. Not on Diana's account, but for his own vengeful satisfaction was this resolve made.

He rode straight to his cousin and told her the news. The statement that Arthur was engaged to marry Louise Merrick drove her to a wild anger no less powerful because she restrained any appearance of it. Surveying her cousin steadily through her veiled lashes she asked:

"Is there no way we can prevent this thing?"

Mershon stalked up and down before her like a caged beast. His eyes were red and wicked; his lips were pressed tightly together. "Diana," said he, "I've never wanted anything in this world as I want that girl. I can't let that mollicoddle marry her!"

She flushed, and then frowned. It was not pleasant to hear the man of her choice spoken of with such contempt, but after all their disappointment and desires were alike mutual and she could not break with Charlie at this juncture.

Suddenly he paused and asked:

"Do you still own that country home near East Orange?"

"Yes; but we never occupy it now. Father does not care for the place."

"Is it deserted?"

"Practically so. Madame Cerise is there in charge."

"Old Cerise? I was going to ask you what had become of that clever female."

"She was too clever, Charlie. She knew too much of our affairs, and was always prying into things that did not concern her. So father took an antipathy to the poor creature, and because she has served our family for so long sent her to care for the house at East Orange."

"Pensioned her, eh? Well, this is good news, Di; perhaps the best news in the world. I believe it will help clear up the situation. Old Cerise and I always understood each other."

"Will you explain?" asked Diana, coldly.

"I think not, my fair cousin. I prefer to keep my own counsel. You made

a bad mess of that little deal last night, and are responsible for the climax that faces us. Besides, a woman is never a good conspirator. I know what you want; and I know what I want. So I'll work this plan alone, if you please. And I'll win, Di; I'll win as sure as fate--if you'll help me."

"You ask me to help you and remain in the dark?"

"Yes; it's better so. Write me a note to Cerise and tell her to place the house and herself unreservedly at my disposal."

She stared at him fixedly, and he returned the look with an evil smile. So they sat in silence a moment. Then slowly she arose and moved to her escritoire, drawing a sheet of paper toward her and beginning to write.

"Is there a telephone at the place?" enquired Mershon abruptly.

"Yes."

"Then telephone Cerise after I'm gone. That will make it doubly sure. And give me the number, too, so I can jot it down. I may need it."

Diana quietly tore up the note.

"The telephone is better," she said. "Being in the dark, sir, I prefer not to commit myself in writing."

"You're quite right, Di," he exclaimed, admiringly. "But for heaven's sake don't forget to telephone Madame Cerise."

"I won't Charlie. And, see here, keep your precious plans to yourself, now and always. I intend to know nothing of what you do."

"I'm merely the cats-paw, eh? Well, never mind. Is old Cerise to be depended upon, do you think?"

"Why not?" replied the girl. "Cerise belongs to the Von Taers--body and soul!"