

CHAPTER XI

THE BROWN LIMOUSINE

The second evening of the society Kermess passed without unusual event and proved very successful in attracting throngs of fashionable people to participate in its pleasures.

Louise and her cousins were at their stations early, and the second installment of Uncle John's flowers was even more splendid and profuse than the first. It was not at all difficult to make sales, and the little money drawer began to bulge with its generous receipts.

Many a gracious smile or nod or word was bestowed upon Miss Merrick by the society folk; for these people had had time to consider the accusation against her implied by Diana Von Taer's manner when the pearls were discovered in the empty flower vase. Being rather impartial judges--for Diana was not a popular favorite with her set--they decided it was absurd to suppose a niece of wealthy old John Merrick would descend to stealing any one's jewelry. Miss Merrick might have anything her heart desired with-out pausing to count the cost, and moreover she was credited with sufficient common sense to realize that the Von Taer heirlooms might easily be recognized anywhere. So a little gossip concerning the queer incident had turned the tide of opinion in Louise's favor, and as she was a recent debutante with a charming personality

all vied to assure her she was held blameless.

A vast coterie of the select hovered about the flower booth all the evening, and the cousins joyously realized they had scored one of the distinct successes of the Kermess. Arthur could not get very close to Louise this evening; but he enjoyed her popularity and from his modest retirement was able to exchange glances with her at intervals, and these glances assured him he was seldom absent from her thoughts.

Aside from this, he had the pleasure of glowering ferociously upon Charlie Mershone, who, failing to obtain recognition from Miss Merrick, devoted himself to his cousin Diana, or at least lounged nonchalantly in the neighborhood of the Hindoo Booth. Mershone was very quiet. There was a speculative look upon his features that denoted an undercurrent of thought.

Diana's face was as expressionless as ever. She well knew her action of the previous evening had severed the cordial relations formerly existing between her and Mr. Merrick's nieces, and determined to avoid the possibility of a snub by keeping aloof from them. She greeted whoever approached her station in her usual gracious and cultured manner, and refrained from even glancing toward Louise.

Hedrik Von Taer appeared for an hour this evening. He quietly expressed his satisfaction at the complete arrangements of the Kermess, chatted a moment with his daughter, and then innocently marched over to the flower

booth and made a liberal purchase from each of the three girls. Evidently the old gentleman had no inkling of the incident of the previous evening, or that Diana was not still on good terms with the young ladies she had personally introduced to society. His action amused many who noted it, and Louise blushing but thoroughly self-possessed, exchanged her greetings with Diana's father and thanked him heartily for his purchase. Mr. Von Taer stared stonily at Charlie Mershone, but did not speak to him.

Going out he met John Merrick, and the two men engaged in conversation most cordially.

"You did the trick all right, Von Taer," said the little millionaire, "and I'm much obliged, as you may suppose. You're not ashamed of my three nieces, I take it?"

"Your nieces, Mr. Merrick, are very charming young women," was the dignified reply. "They will grace any station in life to which they may be called."

When the evening's entertainment came to an end Arthur Weldon took Louise home in his new brown limousine, leaving Patsy and her father, Uncle John and Beth to comfortably fill the Doyle motor car. Now that the engagement of the young people had been announced and accepted by their friends, it seemed very natural for them to prefer their own society.

"What do you think of it, Uncle John, anyhow?" asked Patsy, as they rode home. "It's all right, dear," he announced, with a sigh. "I hate to see my girls take the matrimonial dive, but I guess they've got to come to it, sooner or later."

"Later, for me," laughed Patsy.

"As for young Weldon," continued Mr. Merrick, reflectively, "he has some mighty good points, as I found out long ago. Also he has some points that need filing down. But I guess he'll average up with most young men, and Louise seems to like him. So let's try to encourage 'em to be happy; eh, my dears?"

"Louise," said Beth, slowly, "is no more perfect than Arthur. They both have faults which time may eradicate, and as at present they are not disposed to be hypercritical they ought to get along nicely together."

"If 't was me," said the Major, oracularly, "I'd never marry Weldon."

"He won't propose to you, Daddy dear," returned Patsy, mischievously; "he prefers Louise."

"I decided long ago," said Uncle John, "that I'd never be allowed to pick out the husbands for my three girls. Husbands are a matter of taste, I guess, and a girl ought to know what sort she wants. If she

don't, and makes a mistake, that's her look-out. So you can all choose for yourselves, when the time comes, and I'll stand by you, my dears, through thick and thin. If the husband won't play fair, you can always bet your Uncle John will." "Oh, we know, that," said Patsy, simply; and Beth added: "Of course, Uncle, dear."

Thursday evening, the third and last of the series, was after all the banner night of the great Kermess. All the world of society was present and such wares as remained unsold in the booths were quickly auctioned off by several fashionable gentlemen with a talent for such brigandage. Then, the national dances and songs having been given and received enthusiastically, a grand ball wound up the occasion in the merriest possible way.

Charlie Mershone was much in evidence this evening, as he had been before; but he took no active part in the proceedings and refrained from dancing, his pet amusement. Diana observed that he made frequent trips downstairs, perhaps to the hotel offices. No one paid any attention to his movements, except his cousin, and Miss Von Taer, watching him intently, decided that underneath his calm exterior lurked a great deal of suppressed excitement.

At last the crowd began to disperse. Uncle John and the Major took Beth and Patsy away early, as soon as their booth was closed; but Louise stayed for a final waltz or two with Arthur. She soon found, however, that the evening's work and excitement had tired her, and asked to be

taken home.

"I'll go and get the limousine around," said Arthur. "That new chauffeur is a stupid fellow. By the time you've managed in this jam to get your wraps I shall be ready. Come down in the elevator and I'll meet you at the Thirty-second street entrance."

As he reached the street a man--an ordinary servant, to judge from his appearance--ran into him full tilt, and when they recoiled from the impact the fellow with a muttered curse raised his fist and struck young Weldon a powerful blow. Reeling backward, a natural anger seized Arthur, who was inclined to be hot-headed, and he also struck out with his fists, never pausing to consider that the more dignified act would be to call the police.

The little spurt of fistcuffs was brief, but it gave Mershone, who stood in the shadow of the door-way near by, time to whisper to a police officer, who promptly seized the disputants and held them both in a firm grip.

"What's all this?" he demanded, sternly.

"That drunken loafer assaulted me without cause" gasped Arthur, panting.

"It's a lie!" retorted the man, calmly; "he struck me first."

"Well, I arrest you both," said the officer.

"Arrest!" cried Arthur, indignantly; "why, confound it, man, I'm--"

"No talk!" was the stern command. "Come along and keep quiet."

As if the whole affair had been premeditated and prearranged a patrol wagon at that instant backed to the curb and in spite of Arthur Weldon's loud protests he was thrust inside with his assailant and at once driven away at a rapid gait.

At the same moment a brown limousine drew up quietly before the entrance.

Louise, appearing in the doorway in her opera cloak, stood hesitating on the steps, peering into the street for Arthur. A man in livery approached her.

"This way, please, Miss Merrick," he said. "Mr. Weldon begs you to be seated in the limousine. He will join you in a moment."

With this he led the way to the car and held the door open, while the girl, having no suspicion, entered and sank back wearily upon the seat. Then the door abruptly slammed, and the man in livery leaped to the seat beside the chauffeur and with a jerk the car darted away.

So sudden and astounding was this denouement that Louise did not even scream. Indeed, for the moment her wits were dazed.

And now Charlie Mershone stepped from his hiding place and with a satirical smile entered the vestibule and looked at his watch. He found he had time to show himself again at the Kermess, for a few moments, before driving to the ferry to catch the train for East Orange.

Some one touched him on the arm.

"Very pretty, sir, and quite cleverly done," remarked a quiet voice.

Mershone started and glared at the speaker, a slender, unassuming man in dark clothes.

"What do you mean, fellow?"

"I've been watching the comedy, sir, and I saw you were the star actor, although you took care to keep hidden in the wings. That bruiser who raised the row took his arrest very easily; I suppose you've arranged to pay his fine, and he isn't worried. But the gentleman surely was in hard luck pounded one minute and pinched the next. You arranged it very cleverly, indeed."

Charlie was relieved that no mention was made of the abduction of Louise. Had that incident escaped notice? He gave the man another sharp

look and turned away; but the gentle touch again restrained him.

"Not yet, please, Mr. Mershone."

"Who are you?" asked the other, scowling.

"The house detective. It's my business to watch things. So I noticed you talking to the police officer; I also noticed the patrol wagon standing on the opposite side of the street for nearly an hour--my report on that will amuse them at headquarters, won't it? And I noticed you nod to the bruiser, just as your victim came out."

"Let go of my arm, sir!"

"Do you prefer handcuffs? I arrest you. We'll run over to the station and explain things."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Mershone. I believe I ran you in for less than this, some two years ago. You gave the name of Ryder, then. Better take another, to-night."

"If you're the house detective, why do you mix up in this affair?" enquired Mershone, his anxiety showing in his tone.

"Your victim was a guest of the house."

"Not at all. He was merely attending the Kermess."

"That makes him our guest, sir. Are you ready?"

Mershone glanced around and then lowered his voice.

"It's all a little joke, my dear fellow," said he, "and you are liable to spoil everything with your bungling. Here," drawing a roll of bills from his pocket, "don't let us waste any more time. I'm busy."

The man chuckled and waved aside the bribe.

"You certainly are, sir; you're very busy, just now! But I think the sergeant over at the station will give you some leisure. And listen, Mr. Mershone: I've got it in for that policeman you fixed; he's a cheeky individual and a new man. I'm inclined to think this night's work will cost him his position. And the patrol, which I never can get when I want it, seems under your direct management. These things have got to be explained, and I need your help. Ready, sir?"

Mershone looked grave, but he was not wholly checkmated. Thank heaven the bungling detective had missed the departure of Louise altogether. Charlie's arrest at this critical juncture was most unfortunate, but need not prove disastrous to his cleverly-laid plot. He decided it would

be best to go quietly with the "plain-clothes man."

Weldon had become nearly frantic in his demands to be released when Mershone was ushered into the station. He started at seeing his enemy and began to fear a thousand terrible, indefinite things, knowing how unscrupulous Mershone was. But the Waldorf detective, who seemed friendly with the police sergeant, made a clear, brief statement of the facts he had observed. Mershone denied the accusation; the bruiser denied it; the policeman and the driver of the patrol wagon likewise stolidly denied it. Indeed, they had quite another story to tell.

But the sergeant acted on his own judgment. He locked up Mershone, refusing bail. He suspended the policeman and the driver, pending investigation. Then he released Arthur Weldon on his own recognisance, the young man promising to call and testify when required.

The house detective and Arthur started back to the Waldorf together.

"Did you notice a young lady come to the entrance, soon after I was driven away?" he asked, anxiously.

"A lady in a rose-colored opera cloak, sir?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Why, she got into a brown limousine and rode away." Arthur gave a

sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness that chauffeur had a grain of sense," said he. "I wouldn't have given him credit for it. Anyway, I'm glad Miss Merrick is safe."

"Huh!" grunted the detective, stopping short. "I begin to see this thing in its true light. How stupid we've been!"

"In what way?" enquired Arthur, uneasily.

"Why did Mershone get you arrested, just at that moment?"

"Because he hated me, I suppose."

"Tell me, could he have any object in spiriting away that young lady--in abducting her?" asked the detective.

"Could he?" cried Arthur, terrified and trembling. "He had every object known to villainy. Come to the hotel! Let's hurry, man--let's fly!"