

CHAPTER XIII

DIANA REVOLTS

Charlie Mershone had no difficulty in securing his release when Parker came on duty at six o'clock. He called up a cab and went at once to his rooms at the Bruxtelle; and Fogerty followed him.

While he discarded his dress-coat, took a bath and donned his walking suit Mershone was in a brown study. Hours ago Louise had been safely landed at the East Orange house and placed in the care of old Madame Cerise, who would guard her like an ogre. There was no immediate need of his hastening after her, and his arrest and the discovery of half his plot had seriously disturbed him. This young man was no novice in intrigue, nor even in crime. Arguing from his own stand-point he realized that the friends of Louise were by this time using every endeavor to locate her. They would not succeed in this, he was positive. His plot had been so audacious and all clues so cleverly destroyed or covered up that the most skillful detective, knowing he had abducted the girl; would be completely baffled in an attempt to find her.

The thought of detectives, in this connection, led him to decide that he was likely to be shadowed. That was the most natural thing for his opponents to do. They could not prove Mershone's complicity in the

disappearance of Louise Merrick, but they might easily suspect him, after that little affair of Weldon's arrest. Therefore if he went to the girl now he was likely to lead others to her. Better be cautious and wait until he had thrown the sleuths off his track.

Having considered this matter thoroughly, Mershone decided to remain quiet. By eight o'clock he was breakfasting in the grill room, and Fogerty occupied a table just behind him.

During the meal it occurred to Charlie to telephone to Madame Cerise for assurance that Louise had arrived safely and without a scene to attract the attention of strangers. Having finished breakfast he walked into the telephone booth and was about to call his number when a thought struck him. He glanced out of the glass door. In the hotel lobby were many loungers. He saw a dozen pairs of eyes fixed upon him idly or curiously; one pair might belong to the suspected detective. If he used the telephone there would be a way of discovering the number he had asked for. That would not do--not at all! He concluded not to telephone, at present, and left the booth. His next act was to purchase a morning paper, and seating himself carelessly in a chair he controlled the impulse to search for a "scare head" on the abduction of Miss Merrick. If he came across the item, very well; he would satisfy no critical eye that might be scanning him by hunting for it with a show of eagerness. The game was in his hands, he believed, and he intended to keep it there.

Fogerty was annoyed by the man's evident caution. It would not be easy to surprise Mershone in any self-incriminating action. But, after all, reflected the boy, resting comfortably in the soft-padded cushions of a big leather chair, all this really made the case the more interesting. He was rather glad Mershone was in no hurry to precipitate a climax. A long stern chase was never a bad chase.

By and bye another idea occurred to Charlie. He would call upon his cousin Diana, and get her to telephone Madame Cerise for information about Louise. It would do no harm to enlighten Diana as to what he had done. She must suspect it already; and was she not a co-conspirator? But he could not wisely make this call until the afternoon. So meantime he took a stroll into Broadway and walked leisurely up and down that thoroughfare, pausing occasionally to make a trifling purchase and turning abruptly again and again in the attempt to discover who might be following him. No one liable to be a detective of any sort could he discern; yet he was too shrewd to be lulled into a false belief that his each and every act was unobserved.

Mershone returned to his hotel, went to his room, and slept until after one o'clock, as he had secured but little rest the night before in his primitive quarters at the police station. It was nearly two when he reappeared in the hotel restaurant for luncheon, and he took his seat and ate with excellent appetite.

During this meal Mr. Fogerty also took occasion to refresh himself,

eating modestly at a retired table in a corner. Mershone's sharp eyes noted him. He remembered seeing this youth at breakfast, and thoughtfully reflected that the boy's appearance was not such as might be expected from the guest of a fashionable and high-priced hotel. Silently he marked this individual as the possible detective. He had two or three others in his mind, by this time; the boy was merely added to the list of possibilities.

Mershone was a capital actor. After luncheon he sauntered about the hotel, stared from the window for a time, looked at his watch once or twice with an undecided air, and finally stepped to the porter and asked him to call a cab. He started for Central Park; then changed his mind and ordered the man to drive him to the Von Taer residence, where on arrival Diana at once ordered him shown into her private parlor.

The young man found his cousin stalking up and down in an extremely nervous manner. She wrung her delicate fingers with a swift, spasmodic motion. Her eyes, nearly closed, shot red rays through their slits.

"What's wrong, Di?" demanded Mershone, considerably surprised by this intense display of emotion on the part of his usually self-suppressed and collected cousin.

"Wrong!" she echoed; "everything is wrong. You've ruined yourself, Charlie; and you're going to draw me into this dreadful crime, also, in spite of all I can do!"

"Bah! don't be a fool," he observed, calmly taking a chair.

"Am I the fool?" she exclaimed, turning upon him fiercely. "Did I calmly perpetrate a deed that was sure to result in disgrace and defeat?"

"What on earth has happened to upset you?" he asked, wonderingly. "It strikes me everything is progressing beautifully."

"Does it, indeed?" was her sarcastic rejoinder. "Then your information is better than mine. They called me up at three o'clock this morning to enquire after Louise Merrick--as if I should know her whereabouts. Why did they come to me for such information? Why?" she stamped her foot for emphasis.

"I suppose," said Charlie Mershon, "they called up everyone who knows the girl. It would be natural in case of her disappearance."

"Come here!" cried Diana, seizing his arm and dragging him to a window.

"Be careful; try to look out without showing yourself. Do you see that man on the corner?"

"Well?"

"He has been patrolling this house since day-break. He's a detective!"

Charlie whistled.

"What makes you think so, Di? Why on earth should they suspect you?"

"Why? Because my disreputable cousin planned the abduction, without consulting me, and--"

"Oh, come, Di; that's a little too--"

"Because the girl has been carried to the Von Taer house--my house--in East Orange; because my own servant is at this moment her jailor, and--"

"How should they know all this?" interrupted Mershone, impatiently. "And how do you happen to know it yourself, Diana?"

"Madame Cerise called me up at five o'clock, just after Louise's uncle had been here for the second time, with a crew of officers. Cerise is in an ugly mood. She said a young girl had been brought to her a prisoner, and Mr. Mershone's orders were to keep her safely until he came. She is greatly provoked at our using her in this way, but promised to follow instructions if I accepted all responsibility."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I knew nothing of the affair, but had put the house and her

services at your disposal. I said I would accept no responsibility whatever for anything you might do."

Mershone looked grave, and scowled.

"The old hag won't betray us, will she?" he asked, uneasily.

"She cannot betray me, for I have done nothing. Charlie," she said, suddenly facing him, "I won't be mixed in this horrid affair. You must carry out your infamous plan in your own way. I know nothing, sir, of what you have done; I know nothing of what you intend to do. Do you understand me?"

He smiled rather grimly.

"I hardly expected, my fair cousin, that you would be frightened into retreat at this stage of the game, when the cards are all in our hands. Do you suppose I decided to carry away Louise without fully considering what I was doing, and the immediate consequences of my act? And wherein have I failed? All has gone beautifully up to this minute. Diana, your fears are absolutely foolish, and against your personal interests. All that I am doing for myself benefits you doubly. Just consider, if you will, what has been accomplished for our mutual benefit: The girl has disappeared under suspicious circumstances; before she again rejoins her family and friends she will either be my wife or Arthur Weldon will prefer not to marry her. That leaves him open to appreciate the charms

of Diana Von Taer, does it not? Already, my dear cousin, your wishes are accomplished. My own task, I admit, is a harder one, because it is more delicate."

The cold-blooded brutality of this argument caused even Diana to shudder. She looked at the young man half fearfully as she asked:

"What is your task?"

"Why, first to quiet Louise's fears; then to turn her by specious arguments--lies, if you will--against Weldon; next to induce her to give me her hand in honest wedlock. I shall tell her of my love, which is sincere; I shall argue--threaten, if necessary; use every reasonable means to gain her consent."

"You'll never succeed!" cried Diana, with conviction.

"Then I'll try other tactics," said he blandly.

"If you do, you monster, I'll expose you," warned the girl.

"Having dissolved partnership, you won't be taken into my confidence, my fair cousin. You have promised to know nothing of my acts, and I'll see you don't." Then he sprang from his chair and came to her with a hard, determined look upon his face. "Look here, Di; I've gone too far in this game to back out now, I'm going to carry it through if it costs me my

life and liberty--and yours into the bargain! I love Louise Merrick! I love her so well that without her the world and its mockeries can go to the devil! There's nothing worth living for but Louise--Louise. She's going to be my wife, Diana--by fair means or foul I swear to make her my wife."

He had worked himself up to a pitch of excitement surpassing that of Diana. Now he passed his hand over his forehead, collected himself with a slight shudder, and resumed his seat.

Diana was astonished. His fierce mood served to subdue her own. Regarding him curiously for a time she finally asked:

"You speak as if you were to be allowed to have your own way--as if all society was not arrayed against you. Have you counted the cost of your action? Have you considered the consequences of this crime?"

"I have committed no crime," he said stubbornly. "All's fair in love and war."

"The courts will refuse to consider that argument, I imagine," she retorted. "Moreover, the friends of this kidnaped girl are powerful and active. They will show you no mercy if you are discovered."

"If I fail," answered Mershone, slowly, "I do not care a continental what they do to me, for my life will be a blank without Louise. But I

really see no reason to despair, despite your womanish croakings. All seems to be going nicely and just as I had anticipated."

"I am glad that you are satisfied," Diana returned, with scornful emphasis. "But understand me, sir; this is none of my affair in any way--except that I shall surely expose you if a hair of the girl's head is injured. You must not come here again. I shall refuse to see you. You ought not to have come to-day."

"Is there anything suspicious in my calling upon my cousin--as usual?"

"Under such circumstances, yes. You have not been received at this house of late years, and my father still despises you. There is another danger you have brought upon me. My father seemed suspicious this morning, and asked me quite pointedly what I knew of this strange affair."

"But of course you lied to him. All right, Diana; perhaps there is nothing to be gained from your alliance, and I'll let you out of the deal from this moment. The battle's mine, after all, and I'll fight it alone. But--I need more money. You ought to be willing to pay, for so far the developments are all in your favor."

She brought a handful of notes from her desk.

"This ends our partnership, Charlie," she said.

"Very well. A woman makes a poor conspirator, but is invaluable as a banker."

"There will be no more money. This ends everything between us."

"I thought you were game, Di. But you're as weak as the ordinary feminine creation."

She did not answer, but stood motionless, a defiant expression upon her face. He laughed a little, bowed mockingly, and went away.